

Ice on the Rhine

By: IamInferior

Napoleon marches on, nations trembling in his wake. The flames of revolution burn bright, and the common folk of Europe flock to the ideals of nationalism and liberalism like moths to a flame. Discord undermines the Holy Roman Empire, and in secret clubs across Germany, people discuss Corona, Austria, and unification. Maestro, choose your instrument, and let the music play.

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Prologue: A Paper

Riley Aslaugssen

GERH122

Professor Theodore Brauning

9 December 2013

German History 122: Corona, Arendelle, and the North German Federation Midterm Paper 1

"The forces of nature and the powers of magic have always served the Norse well. That is why your Christian men will always falter." - Torg Shincracker, shortly before his head was chopped off

Torg was not necessarily wrong, though. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Norse were indeed blessed with mystic powers, allowing to conquer and raid other peoples, and even drive their boats to the Americas. Some myths trace these powers to the Aesir and Vanir. The one most relevant to German history is the Scylding tale.

The Scyldings, a legendary Danish royal dynasty are descended from Scaef, who washed ashore at Scania. They are allegedly descended from Woden/Odin, and Skadi eventually married and had much issue with Odin, and it's not inconceivable that some of that divine blood wormed its way into a Danish noble house. When Elsa's ancestors took over, they would've likely married into local families for legitimacy, in the process acquiring some of that now very dilute divine blood. For what's it's worth, the Rurikids allegedly descend from the Scyldings, and so the icy conquest of Russia may have been a similar event.

The story begins in the early 1520s with the dissolution of the Kalmar Union. The rebels, heartened by strings of crushing victories, and

looking back to Magnus Eriksson, who was King of Sweden and Norway, decide that Norway is the natural territory of Sweden. The war drags on a few years more, ending with the crowning of Gustav Vasa as King of Sweden-Norway. Denmark stood alone.

The troubles did not end there. In 1533, an uprising occurred in Denmark seeking the return of Christian II. The Holy Roman Emperor, hoping to aid the cause of his sister, who was Christian's wife (although she grew very sick after the Swedish revolt, she barely survived), pledged his assistance. Although successful at first, the war does not end quickly as hoped, as Gustav I intervenes on the side of Danish loyalists. It soon becomes a bloody quagmire, but Christian II, who hoped to reform the Danish monarchy towards absolutism, is all too eager to press it further. Finally, Charles V, disgusted with the human cost of the affair, Christian's desire for an absolute crown, and the money it is costing, promised to divide Denmark into its three traditional duchies and deny Christian the absolute crown he had hoped for. When Sweden sued for peace, Christian became King of Sjaelland, not King of Denmark, a kingdom that would heretofore be referred to as the Southern Isles.

A loyal and successful commander from a minor house is granted Jutland. In one of the battles, the captured enemy nobles spat at him and called him a weasel. In response, he said, "Weasel I may be, but do you see all the men behind me? If I am a weasel, I am duke of an entire weasel town." Thus, Jutland would be jokingly (and eventually seriously) referred to by the Germans as Weaseltown. Aaron Hohenzollern, hailing from a cadet branch of the family, lands in Bergen, erecting a fortress nearby to defend it. After defeating the Swedish forces sent to reclaim it, they agree to cede Hordaland, Rogaland, and much of Ostlandet in the peace treaty, which becomes the new Grand Duchy of Hordaland. A town grows near the castle, called Aaron's Dale, and eventually merges with metropolitan Bergen. When the time comes to assume royal dignity, the kingdom is not named Hordaland, but Arendelle, after the faithful castle.

Almost a hundred years later, tensions were mounting in the Holy Roman Empire between the Protestant north and Catholic south. It is no surprise, then, that war breaks out when Emperor Matthias tries to name his successor. The Bohemians rebel, and almost immediately, the Hohenzollerns of Prussia and Arendelle join them, seeking to take more independence and power from Austria. They lead a coalition of other German states in the north, including the Southern Isles and Weselton.

It goes disastrously.

Although the rebels win some battles at first, the ability of the Emperor to draw upon Spanish allies soon grinds the rebels down. The Prussian Hohenzollerns are forced from the ancestral home, then forced from Germany, then forced from even their fortifications in Prussia, fleeing to a small fishing town named Corona. Desperate, the rebels send envoys throughout Europe. They hope to secure Swedish aid, but Sweden declines. Instead, help comes from an unlikely source-the Ottomans. The Turks open up a second front near Hungary, which eats up enough Imperial troops to allow the rebels to halt the advance in the north. But the war dragged on. Isolated from the rest of Germany, the northern states and former Danish kingdoms began to form tight-knit relations with each other, and the Prussian Hohenzollerns adopted more of the mannerisms and architecture of their Polish hosts. The Bohemians, cut off from both their northern allies and their Ottoman supporters, are brought back into line. But the war does not end, the northerners stubbornly holding out. Finally, their prayers are answered in 1635, with French intervention. This would begin a long, powerful, and enduring friendship between the northern German kings and France, along which would be exchanged goods, culture, and military aid.

Thus the Holy Roman Empire became more and more divided between the growing strength and wealth of Hohenzollern Corona and its protestant allies and Austria. The Greater German question would not be over Austria, but over Corona, with its subtly different culture and influence over northern German and Danish states that

no longer quite belonged fully in a united German nation, but did not belong anywhere else either.

Grade: C+

Although you did an admirable job summarizing the history, you failed to address the prompt fully. You need to analyze explicitly how these events led to the formation of the North German Federation. Furthermore, Wikipedia is not considered a good source for this class. It's a good start though, and you could definitely do something better. Remember this is only 15% of your grade.

Author Notes: Cover image by maddigonzaalez on tumblr.

Don't take this too seriously. I'm not a historian, professional or amateur. This story was born out of an idea swapping session on a web forum, not some academic panel. The history here is not necessarily ironclad accurate, or even mostly accurate. At best, consider it vaguely plausible and reasonable enough for me to slap together some semblance of a plot. If you ever think I'm doing something stupid and totally wrong, I probably am. This is my hobby, and I make plenty of mistakes all the time. If it sounds pretentious, remember that I'm trying to imitate a certain kind of tone to suggest this as some alternate universe's boring textbook. I realize that I am highly fallible.

A Storm blows over Europe

For the first time in forever, Elsa's desk was a cluttered mess. Letters piled up like a snowdrift, an practical sea of white. Letters, from nations all over Europe. Letters in French, in German, in English, in Norwegian, in Polish, in Danish, in Spanish. The languages weren't the problem though. Elsa had always been a studious girl. Her Danish and Norwegian were both perfect, her German almost as good. Her French and Polish were not quite at native levels, but certainly still fluent. She was not as adept at the others, but still, there were aides and translators for that. The languages weren't the problem. The contents of the letters were. The howl of the snowstorm whipped against the window. It had been a cold December.

"To the Most" "Glorious" "Beautiful" "Powerful" "Gracious"
"Dangerous" "Royal Majesty" "Queen Elsa" "The Snow Queen"
"Britain" "Austria" "Corona" "Saxony" "Bavaria" "Sweden"
"beseeches to join us in spreading liberty, egalite, and fraternity"
"humbly asks that you not interfere" "demands your neutrality" "that
you not provide any support, moral, material, or military to the
revolutionaries" "that you join in our crusade against the king-slaying
menace" "desires an answer to the 'French and Austrian' question".
They could do so much. They could ruin the cause of monarchy.
They could deliver a decisive victory to France. Elsa could deliver a
decisive victory to France.

Anna had been ecstatic when the French emissary first arrived, early that December. The people had been too. The enemies of France were gathering again, and this was France's hour of need. It was, at last, time to repay the aid given two hundred years ago. Anna ran to the armory (after stopping at the gallery to talk to one of the paintings, it was an odd habit that Elsa had never understood), and returned atop Sven, her mighty steed, in an antique Spanish cuirass three sizes too big, wearing the spic-and-span standard uniform and pickelhaube, and sporting some majestic Hussar wings gifted from

Corona. The sight of it almost made Elsa lose control, but she had held it in. It was best not to be undignified in front of foreign dignitaries. Later that night, she and Anna shared a well-aged bottle of cognac from the cellars and laughed into the night. She wasn't laughing now. Arendelle was surrounded on all sides by Sweden-Norway, and her excuses were wearing thin. Officially, Arendelle was neutral. But the sympathies of the Arendelle people and of Princess Anna were well-known. Every morning posters went up calling for men to join the fight against the Third Coalition, denouncing the crimes of perfidious Albion and the oriental despots of Austria. Every day she sent guards to take them down, but they would always return, like clockwork, by the time dawn broke again. What's worse, men left the country on every ship, axes and satchels in tow. They didn't ever give their real purpose to the captains, but everyone knew. There were so many Coronan and Arendellan men in the 75th Fusiliers that American correspondents were calling it a foreign legion. Her own pickelhaube and military uniform sat in the corner, gleaming in the light of the oil lamp.

And the rumors, they spread too. Sweden-Norway had always been clamping at the bit, looking for any excuse to invade Arendelle and reclaim its lost land. Now people were saying that Arendellans went to France with the blessing of the crown, that their neutrality was a sham. When she told Anna, Anna had tried to comfort her. She conjured fantastical stories of ice magic stopping armies in their tracks, of unbreakable walls and hordes of snow golems smashing against enemy lines. Invaders impaled on seas of ice spikes, frozen hearts and blizzards too thick to march through. But Elsa knew that she couldn't be everywhere at once, and where she wasn't, the army would falter. She had tried to modernize it as best she could, but so much of the equipment was still outdated, some of it even Renaissance and Medieval. She had looked over old budgets, noting with wry disappointment that funds earmarked for new weapons in her youth had actually been spent hiding her powers. Bribes, assassins, palace repairs... but no rifles, no cannon, no frigates. If the Swedes couldn't defeat her in pitched combat, they'd simply siege Arendelle until the people starved. If it came to them storming

the castle, the defenses wouldn't hold. The gates might've kept curious eyes out, but they couldn't stop 12-pounder guns. Bergenhus stood like a stone giant over the bay, cold and unflinching, but it was an old one, and in its frail age would not stop determined Swedish bombardment. Worst of all, their neutrality might be a sham, at least at the dynastic level. Across the sea, Coronan soldiers performed constant drills. They were quickly gaining a reputation as well-trained elite soldiers. Elsa knew that only concern for her well-being stayed Rapunzel's hand now. The Coronan war machine was ready to challenge Habsburg dominance. All across the country, men invoked the memory of the Thirty Years' War. French blood had been spilt to save Dane and German, now it was time to repay the blood debt.

She didn't even know if she could stay home. Anna was all for intervention, but that might change if she could read the letters. The letters from Napoleon wanted Elsa to join him on the front, fighting alongside the French army. She could be the deciding factor. In Egypt, men had died of heat exhaustion. Men died marching towards enemy batteries, torn apart by shrapnel. An icy breeze would ward away the heat. Snow golems would guard men from cannon. It could be the difference between a free Europe and a Europe that continued to suffer under tyranny. The letters, hopeful, visionary, polite, but also urgent, firm, and threatening. If Elsa did not fight with France, then Napoleon could not guarantee the safety of Arendelle, or promise any aid.

There were more than a hundred drafts and proposals torn up or discarded in the waste bin. All in Elsa's own writing, written three times, in Norwegian, then Danish, then German, as was customary. None of them had received the royal wax seal. Elsa walked to the window. She could see the faint sparks of the gas lamps of Bergen through the storm. The gas was limited-it was imported. The food was limited-only so much in the granary. And the people, they were all so fragile. Years of Hohenzollern rule had altered their culture to be less Norwegian and more Danish and German. When the soldiers had taken Stockholm in 1520, they had killed almost a hundred. Cities had been sacked following many sieges throughout history.

The Arendellans were more foreign than the Danes of the 1500s had been. Her bishops also reported gossip about a new band of heretics that almost worshipped her, and would die before surrendering the city. An old song lept to Elsa's lips, unbidden. In a voice that was barely more than a whispering wind, she sang.

"There's so much fear. You're not safe here."

Outside, the storm raged on.

A Shitposter's Story

"Coronaball cannot into space."

Fuckers. Shit-fucking asstards. They didn't understand. Couldn't see. He'd show them.

"Coronan troops were the finest of the 19th century. Their Kingdom Guards were trained in German, British, and Polish techniques, and the equipment was state of the art. Coronan soldiers were worth ten men from any other country."

He posted a picture of Rapunzel standing next to a young Bismarck. Dat short hair. Dat North German Federation. The Kaiserin was his waifu. It was truly a blessing that he could type with one hand.

corona

war

Corona got its ass kicked in both world wars. USA USA USA USA.

hussars

useful

not cannon fodder for Italian tanks

corona

relevant

corona

german

implying coronan slavs are white

He considered dumping his stat blocks. Decided against it. They'd all laugh. Riley, that fucker. Riley is butthurt again. Riley was a shit name. Needed a better one. One like his ancestors. Fucking Ameriboo parents. Needed a rebuttal, still. Can't let them win.

"Elsa could probably still crush modern armies with her ice magic."

implying Arendelle is Corona

implying Coronan plains niggers have internet

implying you don't live in a hovel

He checked the clock. Time, set perfectly. Desk, neat and clean. Ah, ordnung. Had to get to work now. When he got back, he'd show the Brits what banter meant. This would be the day. Could feel it.

He was five minutes early to lecture. Same as always. So was everyone else. You could set your clock by it. Well, maybe you couldn't. Wasn't quite that precise. It was pretty good though. Not even gommunism :DDDD could suppress it. He took his seat, E4. Moments later, a greasy unkempt blob sat next to him. He was wearing a reddit shirt. Didn't have a fedora, but used to. An idiot. Repulsive. Always had to bum notes off him instead of writing his own. Meme-spouter. He paused. Still his only friend.

The lecture began. Usually they were pretty good, but he knew this one would be shit. Libtard propaganda, all of it. He only took this class because it was required and he liked the professor.

"Today we touch upon a shameful part of Coronan history. The Second World War" most glorious part "and more specifically, the human costs it inflicted" into the trash it goes "the tragedy of the Balkan genocide." The Balkans were trash anyways. Serbian genocide best day of my life.

"Like all events in history, it is best understood coming from the past. Coronan resentment of Austria has deep roots, dating back to the

Reformation. But, with the rise of nationalism, it became unpopular to blame the trouble from Austria on the Austrians themselves, as they were German as well. So instead, their Balkan subjects, especially the Hungarians, were blamed." Muh four million. Why did the German burn the Balkslime? Because he was hungry. Ha. Ha. "-schluss was followed by the rounding up of Balkan subjects, who were then sent to camps..."

There was someone behind him. He turned around. It was a girl.

"And eventually this led to the division of Germany into North Germany and South Germany following the conclusion of the war..."

She had platinum blonde hair and deep blue eyes, a button nose, a small, meek smile, and a light blue dress. She took the seat on the other side of him, and began to babble in a language he only faintly recognized as Norwegian. After nearly a minute, she stopped, blushed, looked down at her feet, then back at him. When she began to talk again, it was in his familiar German.

"Umm. Hello. My name is Ingrid. I am from the HOSAR."

"Uhhhh..."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! Errr, again. Wait, I apologized in Norwegian before, didn't I? The HOSAR is the Hordaland-Ostlandet Semi-Autonomous Region. You... uhhh... might know it better as Arendelle. The name sounds similar to the word for leg-hose, you see, so it sort of... is funny, comparing the communist rule to being pants. I'm rambling again, aren't I?"

"Not at all, I always love to learn about other countries and their history. It's fascinating."

Smooth.

"Really? Because I love history too! That's why I'm taking this class. Not because I have to, I'm foreign exchange student, we have

different requirements. It's always so interesting to me, since we lost so much of it in the Cultural Revolution."

"Yeah, I like history too. I really like imagining how things could've gone differently, if battles went other ways..." If the Third Reich had won.

"Do... do you mind we form a study group?"

"Huh? Oh, of course not."

"Yes, I need the help, especially since I missed the first two lectures. If I fail my classes they take away my scholarship, and I can't afford the tuition on my own. There was a rumor that my family was related to some old Norwegian nobility, so they took away everything we had in the Cultural Revolution."

"Oh... well... I'd be more than happy to help."

She smiled at him. Perhaps he wouldn't be shitposting on /int/ tonight after all.

An American in Queen Elsa's Court

Dear Diary,

An American in Queen Elsa's Court. Has a certain ring to it, doesn't it? Mom and Pop sure would be proud of me now (Note: If you're reading this following my untimely death, Mom and Pop, please burn it. I know myself too well.) I really don't know why they picked me, though. I don't speak a lick of Norwegian, Danish, or German, and my personality, I've been told, will remind them of the stereotypical yank. Maybe they'll like that. I do have a translator, but there's a problem with that. He's named Sven, and so's the court reindeer (who the hell keeps a court reindeer?). When I saw the palace for the first time, my jaw dropped. The structure was based off 1530s fortifications, with later styles of architecture layered on, and topped off with intricate formations of ice, both clear and opaque, coming in all sorts of colors and shapes. It really would've been better if Jefferson had sent a poet. Or maybe some rock salt. The place is beautiful, but I keep slipping and falling on my face, and I'm wrapped up thicker than a grizzly pelt, it's so cold. Plus, any time I walk alone, I can't understand anyone, and if I take Sven, it confuses them.

I love my job.

Dear Diary,

Titles were just made to be absurd, weren't they? If Arendelle and Norway were considered one, then Arendelle would hold much of the land, most of the population, and a great deal of the trade. But Queen Elsa can't call herself Queen of Norway because that's a title held by the Swedes, even though her claim would be de facto stronger. If she tried to claim it, it would be a major diplomatic insult to Sweden and almost certainly lead to war. Instead, she's Queen of Arendelle-a country made up just to give the Arendellan Hohenzollerns royal dignity. It's even named after their ancestral

home. So they just made up a country to make themselves more important in the matters of court. But the farce doesn't stop there. When Elsa ascended to the throne, Princess Anna was created Duchess of Ostlandet. Furthermore, her house name, Hohenzollern, can also be used as a surname. So she's Lady Hohenzollern, but you're not supposed to call her that, especially considering that Elsa would also be a Lady Hohenzollern, as would Queen Rapunzel, instead referring to her formally as Duchess Ostlandet, which I can't even pronounce. But she insists on being called Anna, or at most, Princess Anna, an offer I'm willing to take, even if that might be a faux pas.

And then there's Duke Weselton (he's quite good at poker, at it turns out. Had to borrow some cash from Sven. Sven the man, not the reindeer. Reindeer don't have money), who, despite "only" being a Duke, is just as independent as Queen Elsa. And don't get me started on the Emperor. The Emperor in Austria is Arendelle's nominal master, but Arendelle, Corona, and other north German states constantly band together to fight against Austria. If anything, Corona is the real Emperor of the north, but despite this, Rapunzel is only a "queen". Although, I hear word that the Junkers (a stupid name for a political faction, by the way. Federalists and Democratic-Republicans are much better ones) are trying to elevate Rapunzel to the rank of Empress over a united Greater Germany. They don't have a strong leader yet, but at the very least such a change would be more rational. After my briefing, I went to relax with Kristoff and Sven, and fed Sven carrots (the deer, not the man), and he seemed to like that. Kristoff (who is a Prince, but not actually of royal blood, being a Prince by marriage, which is ridiculous) seemed to like that too. Maybe reindeer are better than people.

Dear Diary,

The more time I spend here, the more I'm certain that monarchy is one giant prank played on the peasantry. This morning, in the middle of a meeting of state, both the Queen and Princess burst out into

song. And, unfortunately for me, my translator joined them. So it was me, sitting uncomfortably in my chair, as everyone around me sang in Norwegian. It was much, much worse than being left out of a conversation. Quite frankly, it was the most awkward moment of my life. The absurdity didn't end there. Queen Rapunzel came to Arendelle as part of a personal envoy from Corona. This, of course, necessitated a crier to read out her titles. Here comes Rapunzel, by the Grace of God Queen Regnant of Corona, Defender of the Protestant Faith, Grand Princess of Greater Poland, Duchess of Prussia, Duchess of Cleves, Margrave of Brandenburg, Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Count of Pomerania, Count of Pomerania, Protector of Aland, and Guardian of the North German States, Baron of Poznan, Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor of the French Empire, Field Marshal First Class of the Coronan Army, and Grandmaster of the Order of the Iron Cross. There is a certain point where solemnity becomes satire. Halfway through, both Anna and Rapunzel struggled to hold back giggles. Queen Elsa was, as always, austere. Afterwards, they engaged in a mixture of socializing, games, and negotiation. So odd that the family reunion also serves as a matter of national importance. Still, the royal family is remarkably pleasant. I still am completely unable to understand what Anna says when she speaks to me in Norwegian, but the tone is friendly, and both she and Kristoff have mannerisms that could melt any heart. They have invited me to dinner tonight, though the fare (sandwiches) they mentioned seems to be another one of those royal jokes. I was always under the impression nobles ate very ornate meals.

Dear Diary,

I had thought the rumors of Elsa being an ice witch were just that, rumors. Slander, really. Sure, the palace was filled with ice, but they had a royal icemaster. If she could just create ice, why have an icemaster? That's silly (Note: very silly)! Even sillier was when Kristoff mentioned that Rapunzel was magic as well, and that George Washington (bless him), was a great and powerful wizard. It

was clearly a joke around these parts, something not to be taken seriously. Best as I could figure, the rumors started from a disgruntled nobleman from the Southern Isles named Hans. He escaped from the dungeons last year and found refuge amongst the conservative powers. I had assumed that the rumors were just an attempt to slander the queen by portraying her as some sort of sorceress. After all, both Corona and Arendelle were a perpetual thorn in Austria's side, and Arendelle was more constitutional, to contrast with the more absolute rule of Austria. But today gave me reason to doubt that. It hadn't been a good day. First of all, another round of Hans' propaganda was brought to the Queen's attention. Next, news came that Sweden had leased one of their towns as a naval resupply for Britain. Finally, the French emissary pressed his point aggressively. The time had come for Arendelle to pick sides, it could remain neutral no longer. At that moment, the air grew still and cold. A chill ran down my spine. Luckily, the Frenchman backed down. But still, it makes me wonder.

Dear Diary,

Lutefisk has to be some of the most disgusting food I've ever had. Is it a jelly, is it fish, or is it some ungodly abomination in between (It's the third.)? The smell was repugnant, and the texture slimy and gooey, almost like it was still alive (though I'm sure nothing could survive the manufacturing of lutefisk). I tried to choke it down, as a matter of manners, but Anna noticed me struggling to finish. To my surprise, not only did I not have to finish, but she personally prepared a different dish for me, a dish made of crisp fried herring and onions wrapped up in flatbread. It was delicious. I really did not deserve such a kindness. And this morning, my beer was warm. To my great honor, the Queen personally chilled it-and not with any normal ice I've seen before. She truly is magic. But it's a good sort of a magic, I think. Not some sorcerer-queen crushing the peasants, but a kind woman who is willing to help with her powers, and use them for aid great and small. Being born a king isn't a crime anymore than being born low-case in India is. Something to think about.

Dear Diary,

America is truly honored. The queen herself made an ice sculpture of President Jefferson shaking hands with Columbia to show the friendship between our countries. It will be transported by the fastest clippers available, and well-refrigerated. It is a marvel. She is a marvel. Such kindness, such grace, such power vested in one woman. Her sister, the Princess, and Kristoff, the Prince, have been the greatest hosts anyone could ask for. Despite our cultural and linguistic differences, they've bent over backwards to accommodate me. No, more than that. If social contortion and physical contortion were of a kind, they'd all be Indian gurus. I hope that one day America is able to repay such a gesture.

Dear Diary,

Went out with Anna and Kristoff again. We played a game that Sven (still the man, not the reindeer) translated as Wolf-Smack. Evidently they had once been chased by wolves, and now they've made a game of it. Kristoff threw a thing vaguely resembling a wolf, and Anna attempted to smack it with a guitar-shaped bat. She missed, many times, but once she hit it, she rode a horse around the field, circling several white squares. It quite reminded me of a bysball, and I indeed said that, but apparently this is better. For one thing, it's mounted, and for another, the ball is shaped like a wolf. A small wolf. Tiny wolf. Still a wolf. One of the players was some sort of snow gremlin, and I had thought him to be a snowman at first. By now I've learned to take such things in stride. Later, we met some of Her Serene Highness's other friends in a tavern, and I was shocked to learn that Anna made friends with commoners as well (though, since she married one, I suppose I shouldn't have been that shocked). One of them tried to sell me a bizarre sun balm. It actually works very well. Monarchy may be a prank played on peasants by nobles, but Arendelle is no normal monarchy. In other news, an Arendellan

ship was lost this week near the Barbary Coast. Those pirates are really quite a problem.

Dear Diary,

The Hohenzollerns have been gracious hosts, going far beyond even the courtesies demanded by diplomacy. Something has to be done for them. Their situation is precarious beyond belief. I know now that the rumors about Elsa are true. But at the same time, they mean nothing. Queen Elsa has shown herself to be nothing but noble, and she has always worked towards the benefit of Arendelle. And the Princess's family is charming. Kristoff is a commoner, making it a morganatic marriage, but in spite of this, Elsa still blessed the marriage. I think, that despite being a monarchy, Arendelle is a country that understands the spirit of what we're doing in the US. What other monarchy would allow such an unequal marriage? What other family would take a foreign dignitary into their home and treat them as family? These people need to be helped. Something needs to be done for them, and I know exactly what.

FROM: American Legation of Arendelle

TO: President Thomas Jefferson

HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL FOR PRESIDENTS' EYES ONLY

Re: Elsa. Affairs of state going very well. Going to to many dinners with Princess/Kris family now, working out details of plan. Frenchman comes too. Possibility of great diplomatic coup. Recommend discussing expansion of US with congress/justices/etc. Vision-see US from sea to sea. Napoleon wanting Arendelle's aid, Arendelle needs security, we need land, Napoleon willing to sell Louisiana. Plan is to thread the needle, sending ships to Barbary Coast first ostensibly to put down piracy. Marines will then sail north quickly, move to defend Arendelle. Our forces protect Arendelle, Queen will advance with Napoleonic armies with personal guard,

help to defeat Coalitions. Know prez is great admirer of French Rev. and Napoleon. Possibility to earn an ally for the rest of our days while doing the best for our country. Need response ASAP. If nothing else heard from me, assume termination by assassins of Austria/Sweden/Britain/others. Press gangs, etc, indicate Britain knows our intent, wants to put us down first. Must act fast.

We'll call it the Louisiana Purchase.

Bergen: Intermission

It is quiet in Bergen. Birds chirp cheerfully, but the town itself is silent. The sun creeps slowly upward, burning away the gray mist hanging overhead. Children lie in bed, still asleep, while fathers get up, still groggy eyed, preparing to finish the day's work. A mouse scurries through the castle pantry, stealing away scraps of food. These little bits will not be noticed, nor will they be missed. In Bergen Cathedral, the cardinal scribbles away. He has reams of parchment in the back room, but he still takes care not to make mistakes. Every word is precious, every drop of ink valuable. When all else leaves, knowledge can be worth more than gold. He has to prepare. His is an important position, overseeing the Diocese of Bjorgvin. The people of Arendelle are his flock, and he will shepherd them well.

In the royal bedroom, Elsa sleeps. Wisps of snow speckle her hair, and when she tosses and turns, for the briefest of instants you can see the sparkle of snowflakes. After a night of intense negotiations, she has just signed a treaty that will change the course of the 19th century. In it, the Coalition of the Rhine was born, the Rhine being chosen to signify the unity between Germany and France. Now the Third Coalition has, at last, met a rival equal to it in size. The destinies of Corona, Arendelle, and the French Empire now intertwine, and the storm begins in earnest.

There is no one in the streets of Bergen, large and wealthy as it is. But, if one were to walk then, one might feel a certain malaise. Squint, and the image appears. A horse, white as snow and pale as ice. Listen, and the noise grows. The whizzing of a thousand arrows falling to earth, the shattering of bones and the tearing of flesh. Kneel, and the truth appears. A crown, high above the world. A crown, ethereal and mighty beyond comprehension. It is not the end of the world, but it is the end of theirs.

The Ancient Regime is dead.

The bell tower tolls. The Year Eighteen Hundred and Four of Our Lord has begun.

Beat of the Drums and Fife

*"My friend, any hussar that does not die by thirty is a blackguard." -
Antoine Charles Louis de Lasalle*

The docks of Bergen buzzed with activity. On one hand, a giant merchant ship had docked, and was offloading hundreds of crates. Unbeknownst to all but a select few, the crates were loaded with armaments and supplies to outlast a siege, and the merchants were really United States marines. It was the first of many ships that would be pulling into the harbor, and they had the task of assembling coastal batteries and preparing Arendelle's defenses. During the night, some of them had already gone up to the mountains to dig and prepare defensive positions.

On the other, there was a Coronan warship, preparing to send Queen Elsa abroad. It was manned by the finest sailors Corona had to offer, and it bristled with guns. The charts had been carefully consulted, and everything laid into place for the precious cargo it was about to take on. Corona knew the unfortunate fate of the late King and Queen, and it wanted to make sure the new Queen had nothing to fear from the sea.

Kristoff, Sven, and Elsa were waiting at one of the piers.

"So this is it, huh? The Snow Queen finally leaves her icy palace."

Elsa, didn't respond. Her eyes scanned the area, looking for any sign of Anna. It was odd that she wouldn't show up at her departure. Kristoff coughed.

"If you're wondering..."

"Anna said she had a surprise for you!" said Sven.

"A surprise?"

Suddenly, a glimmer appeared off in the distance. It grew larger and larger, to the sound of frantic hoofbeats. A horseman drew closer and closer, lance in hand, sabre at side, and carbine on back. As the figure neared, Elsa made out the face underneath the spiked helmet. It was Anna.

"Anna?"

"Hey Elsa! Look, I have a sur-"

The horse charged onto the dock, and Anna attempted to bring it to a stop, but the momentum was so great that she almost pitched forward off her horse, her helmet falling forward and covering her face. Faces peered out of windows and people ran to the docks, attracted by the noise.

"Prise! Whoops. Colonel Anna Hohenzollern of the 3rd Gdynian Hussars reporting for duty!"

"Anna!"

"Look, Elsa, I have a warhorse!"

"You're not even handling that lance right."

"Well normally I'm supposed to stop by hitting someone with the lance using the speed of my horse."

"Do you even know how to ride a warhorse?"

Anna's grin, already wide, spread ear-to-ear.

"Actually, I do. Remember all those games of Wolf-Smack? I've been practicing my riding and coordination. I asked for an officer's comission when Rapunzel came over too. For once I've got everything planned out. Aren't you excited? I get to go with you, and see France, real France for the first time ever! It'll be like the sisters vacation we never had."

"Anna, you can't go with me."

"What?"

"Someone has to watch the kingdom, someone has to make sure the regency council does their job, someone... needs to be there if I don't make it back."

"Elsa, you can't go through this alone. Please. I can be useful as more than just a spare. I see you working through the night day after day, putting the burden of the whole kingdom on your shoulders. This once, I have the chance to help you."

"It's far, far too dangerous in the war, and I need someone I can trust on the regency cou-"

"Rapunzel can handle the affairs of state while we're gone, and I wouldn't make a good regent anyways. I never could study as hard as you. Elsa. All my life I've been looking at the paintings in the gallery. They were like dreams to me. I looked up to Joan. Love may not have been as glamorous as the paintings were, but I know, deep in my heart, that one of those dreams has to be true. Elsa, I can be useful. There are assassins and blackguards and all sorts of nasty bad guys out there. I can be your Joan of Arc, I can help protect you."

"Anna..."

"You don't have to be afraid. Trust me."

Kristoff stood awkwardly to the side. He had expected something like this would happen as soon as his wife hatched her plot, but that was a lot different from living it.

"So... uhhh... I hope your ship doesn't sink?"

"That was the wrong thing to say," said Sven.

"Yeah, it was Sven, yeah it was. Well, your ship can't sink, can it? If it starts sinking, you can freeze the water over, and ships can't sink through ice."

"That's still the wrong thing to say," said Sven again.

The captain walked out of the ship onto the dock. He turned to look at the assembled trio.

"Your Majesty? Colonel Hohenzollern? The ship will be departing soon, you'd best hurry and make sure you're fully packed."

Elsa looked deep into Anna's eyes, then hugged her. Anna returned the hug. A tear ran down Elsa's cheek, hit the pier, and rolled into the sea, where it disappeared with a noiseless splash.

"I promise, you won't regret this. Because... for the first time in forever, I'll be seeing real baguettes! For the first time in forever, we'll be marching with the vets! And I know that it's totally crazy, to th-"

"Colonel Hohenzollern, this is a Coronan vessel, as so long as you are sailing with me, I am in charge as Captain. Singing is against both Army and Navy regulations."

"Sorry."

The sisters climbed the ramp onto the ship. It creaked and groaned, almost as if it knew the great weight and importance of who it currently bore. In the distance, the clock struck twelve. The wind rushed around them, as if the spirits of nature wished to give Elsa one last caress. The people, although not informed before, had noticed the spectacle and gathered around the harbor. As the ship pushed off into the harbor, they joined into one mass salute. Off in the distance, the castle band struck up a marching tune.

Elsa turned to Anna, and they held each others' hands. An osprey flew over the ship, heading towards the castle.

"We'll be back someday. I know we will."

Blood and Iron: What Gothel Wrought

From the preface of Blood and Iron: What Gothel Wrought by Riley Aslaugssen and Ingrid Haugen

It would be a gross mischaracterization and oversimplification to say that Rapunzel was stupid. By all accounts, she was an intelligent, strong-willed, and feisty individual. What led to such Junker dominance during her reign then? The answer begins with Rapunzel, of course, but it does not begin with her reign.

All the misery of the 20th century, in a very loose way, can be traced back to Mother Gothel. The King and Queen mourned for their lost daughter, but a kingdom cannot sustain itself through mourning. If the monarchy cannot run the nation, someone will. So the landed aristocracy of Corona, the Junkers, took it upon themselves to form a bureaucratic system. As years went by, the bureaucracy strengthened. When Rapunzel took the throne in 1801, following the untimely death of her father, she was taking the helm of a government run heavily by Junkers. The Queen Dowager was not in a position to contest this. If Rapunzel had a more political education, she might've. But Mother Gothel had not groomed Rapunzel to rule, she had groomed her to be obedient. Again, I must stress that Rapunzel was not stupid. Despite being 18 at the time of her reintroduction into the world, she still managed to learn two new languages, Polish and Norwegian (although her Norwegian was not as natural), and thoroughly modernized her German, as Gothel had spoken to her in an antiquated dialect. However, Corona by the early 19th century had become a well-oiled machine, and no longer needed royal intervention, only royal approval. Furthermore, the Junkers were naturally inclined towards militarism, making it almost inevitable that Corona and its associates would oppose Austria in the Napoleonic wars. It was the perfect chance to improve Coronan prestige.

This, of course, led to a further north-south split in German nationalism, the fruits of which would be borne out disastrously later. The grapes of wrath had not yet been plucked and pressed, but to be sure, they now ripened on the vine.

Junker dominance in German politics had another curious effect. It enabled the rise of the 19th century's greatest statesman: Bismarck. Even in his college years, you could see signs of greatness. When his father died in 1839, he was summoned to the capital to take his place in the Diet. He soon gained a reputation as a masterful orator, and his speeches proclaiming the Divine Right to rule of the Hohenzollerns using Rapunzel's powers as proof soon swayed the entire legislature. In March 1841, he was given the job of Chancellor at the unprecedented age of 25. From there, he would shape the course of Europe. German nationalists came to distrust Germany after they sided with Napoleon, and in 1848, during the revolution, the crown of Germany was offered to Austria. They accepted. Not to be outdone, Bismarck countered by uniting the North German Federation and Poland into the German Federation, crowning Rapunzel as Kaiserin. He forged alliances and brokered deals that created a balance of power guaranteeing peace in Europe. But the apparatus was balanced carefully on the Junker government. At the same time, Bismarck had guaranteed the absolute power of the monarchy. By doing this, Bismarck made a grave mistake, perhaps his only one. During the reign of Rapunzel, the machine behaved as intended. Perhaps Bismarck expected future monarchs to behave similarly to Rapunzel. It had seemed like her seventy one year reign had lasted forever. But upon her death in 1872, things would change dramatically.

"Waterloo came thirty years after the death of Frederick the Great; the crash will come thirty years after my departure if things go on like this." - Otto Von Bismarck

The throne passed to Eugene I, a man who some say inherited all the worst traits of his one time thief father. His audacity, ambition, and restlessness were only exacerbated by the long reign of his

mother, during which he held no power at all, it being concentrated in the hands of the bureaucrats. When he took the throne in 1872, he held a great deal of resentment towards Bismarck, the man who supposedly kept him from exercising his birthright. In 1873, Bismarck was sacked, and his carefully selected ministers replaced with cronies and yes-men who would bend to Kaiser Eugene's will. The networks of alliances across Europe could not be controlled by any men of lesser skill than Bismarck, and they soon began to careen towards war. In 1903, the spark came with a revolution in Macedonia led by Gotse Delchev. The incident, minor at first, spiraled into a conflict that would pit the powers of Germany, Corona, the Ottomans, and Russia against Sweden-Norway, the United States, France, Britain, and Italy. Eugene had foolishly overestimated his power, counting on the aid of France and the US. The legacy of the Napoleonic Wars had lain deeply upon him. Every time he saw old maimed veterans, including his own first cousin once removed, Grand Marshal Anna Hohenzollern of France, it had impacted him. It was a tangible reminder of what others had done to Corona. Similarly, romantic stories about the battles throughout Europe shaped his psyche, and he dreamed that the US and France would come riding to Corona's aid again, if war broke out. But his dreams would not come to pass. Corona would be crushed. It had been thirty years almost exactly since Bismarck's dismissal. The humiliating peace terms imposed on Corona in the Treaty of Bucharest led to resentment that would boil over forty years later, and the Russian economy would collapse in the fighting, leading to the Communist Revolution. The Russian bear would not forget the terms imposed by Sweden in exchange for its withdrawal. It had not forgotten the Winter Wars, the Great Northern Wars it had fought so long ago. In 1917, the revolution spread on the rifles of the Red Army, and Sweden fell to communism. Norway, which had reclaimed Arendelle in the Treaty of Bucharest, briefly broke away, but in 1919, it too would fall to communism through coup, and it was turned into a Soviet satellite. Later American writers would cite this as the first instance of the Domino effect.

When we look at all the charts and figures, we often risk losing sight of the human side of history. I will admit that I am not faultless here- this book contains many statistics and graphs. But one must always keep in mind that behind each number is a person. The genocides of the Second World War cannot be condensed down in a simple figure like four million Hungarians or twenty million Soviets. The tragedy of a starving child waiting in line for hours for bread as the Party elite feast hides behind every failed harvest report. I cannot pretend to tell you all of these stories. But I can tell you one. Mother Gothel was a living relic of the Medieval Era. The consequences of her actions can be considered one last strike of the Medieval Era and ancient ways against modernity. With her passing, the modern age came into being. Read on, my friends, and see what Mother Gothel wrought.

Battalions encamped

As requested, here is a report of the troubles encountered on the trip.

I highly recommend we never transport hussars and royalty on the same boat again. They made a dreadful racket at all times, from high noon to the dead of night. Wild parties, drinking, sea shanties. It made it impossible to get any sort of rest. And the princess, far from discouraging them, actually egged them on. The only benefit that was gleaned there was perhaps some small gain in camaraderie. Also note that Her Majesty gets seasick very easily, and that the vomit from these episodes is frozen. It stuck to floors, to the ship's siding, everywhere, and it was very difficult to clean. If I must provide a silver lining, the vomit did not smell of anything except fresh powder. Nevertheless, whenever possible, I suggest that she move by land.

The camp was a noisy pandemonium. A war camp of this size was more like a small city than a clumping of soldiers. There were fighting men, but there were also launderers, chefs, camp followers, and all sorts of hangers on. Napoleon said that an army marched on its stomach, and this is true. It also marches on a thousand other things, ranging from clothing, to water, to powder, to bullets. Those supplies were weighty, and had to be heavily guarded if brought alone. If supplies could not be brought along, they had foraged. If neither could be done, the army would falter and men would die. It is sometimes said that civilization is only a few meals away from collapse at any given time.

For an army, both the soldiers and the guns have to be fed. What we have then is a situation infinitely more precarious.

A few miles away was the Rhine. If one had superhuman hearing, and could filter out all the noises of the camp, then perhaps they

could make out the sound of rushing water.

Anna was not thinking about any of this at the moment. Instead, she was considering what to show her sister. She peeked her head into Elsa's tent.

"Hey there sis, whatcha doing?" said Anna.

"Reading," replied Elsa.

"You should come out and get some fresh air."

"The air here isn't exactly fresh."

"Oh come on, it'll be fun. It'll be educational too. I mean, I'm not the sharpest hammer in the bunch, and I've learned a lot."

Anna walked to Elsa and began to tug at the Queen's arm. After a few moments, Elsa stopped resisting and got up. Together they walked outside and began to survey the camp. In the distance, one could see a thin tendril of smoke extending from another tent. Five minutes of walking later, Anna spotted a group of soldiers drinking and smoking around a cauldron of stew propped up in a clearing. They walked over. The man in the middle, apparently the leader, tipped his hat at them and spoke. He looked to be in an ambiguous middle age, with hair that was starting to gray. His features were very handsome in a classically masculine sort of way. His smile was warm but subdued. His eyes held a knowing spark.

"Well, what brings such fine ladies such as yourselves to our little camp?" asked the man.

"We're exploring!" replied Elsa.

"I see. Well, have some soup. I'm Louis Adam Jean, but everyone just calls me Adam. I had too many relatives named Louis."

"Adam? Oh, too simple of a name for our glorious leader," laughed one of the soldiers.

"Indeed! Such a noble man can only be called Prince Adam,"
chuckled another.

"Prince? There are no princes in France now. No, he's..." said yet
another, as the group began to sing.

(Insert vocaroo link here)/i/s0bZ51FkA0ox (Bad singing warning.)

Louis Adam Jean, Sergeant of rank III

But a larger title and a claim has he

Citizen of France, Citizen of all

Citizen Fraternity is his true call

Of nicer princes, not a single

Even married a small town girl

So come here, have a seat, stay and mingle

As life stories go, his is a pearl

Siblings, he's got two

That's plentier than you

Cousins there were many

but not anymore (oh, shoo)

Loves to sing and dance

Loves to cook and clean

Loves to clean his wife up

if you get what I mean

(Nobody cleans like Gaston!)

Even has a cat and puppy

No wait, that was a carpet and clock

Everyone's got glories past

His just didn't quite quite last

But we love him anyway, cause he's Louis Adam Jean

jean jean jean, jean jean jean

Princes of the Blood, Princes of Ducal Grace

Princes, princes, princes hanging from the gates

But Fraternity is such a giver

He guillotines himself for France

So really he deserves a chance

in la Grande Armee!

The song was cut short by the blast of an explosion.

"See Elsa? They even do songs! Isn't the Army fun?"

"Fun...? Anna, we're here to *kill people* !"

"Oh yeah, huh? I guess I forgot."

There was a wet thud as something landed near Anna.

"Oh. Ew. I think that's a hand."

Baden in Winter

Package is being delivered on time and safe. As recommended, she is under secret watch by our men. These custodians have been put under the command of Louis Adam Jean of Orleans, brother to our dear Duke of Orleans. If he fails at the task, both he and the Duke will be executed, along with their families. Not that I'm worried, both of the brothers have been very loyal to the revolution so far.

We crossed the Rhine today. Already, her powers prove useful. We were able to avoid a bridge crossing close to a German town, hopefully delaying our detection.

The power whirled inside of her, an unending storm. When she gave the signal, it surged out, a white stampede rolling over the waters. Foam and splash hardened in mid air, falling to the river's icy surface with gentle pings. The ice spread deeper and deeper into the river, crystalline matrices forming and reinforcing, until it was thick and strong enough to hold thousands of men marching across at once. March, they did. And after they crossed, she released her hold. The Rhine relaxed, and began to flow again. Only a few shards remained, and then, only for the briefest of spans. They sparkled out of existence, held by the warm embrace of summer waters.

For the first part of our journey, we encountered no one of note. As you predicted, they are marshaling their forces in the Black Forest and Tyrol. They expect to march in behind you and crush your back against the Mediterranean.

They caught a spy in the 3rd Gdynian Hussars camp. Perhaps he wasn't a spy, but he certainly shouldn't have come near. He was young, couldn't be older than twenty, but still a threat. The Austrians couldn't know what was happening, or else they would turn around and face this army, then proceed with their original plan and crush the rest of Napoleon's forces waiting in Italy. He had to be dealt with. The men drew lots as to who would be in the firing squad. Colonel

Hohenzollern had a short stick. His back was placed against a great oak. The men fired. He slumped over. The body was hung on the oak and left to rot. Elsa had a hard time sleeping that night.

We have thoroughly outmaneuvered them. On 13 September, we met our first enemy resistance, if it could be called that. A mere five thousand men, marching southwards. They did not expect any to come up from behind them. We had the element of surprise and superior terrain. The rout was textbook. And we have field tested the package. It was a most excellent result.

The first snows of winter had begun to fall. Elsa had a position up on a hill where she could see the whole battle, a position that could rightly be called commanding. Elsa didn't feel in command. Cavalry were wheeling around, beginning their first charge, as line infantry formed up and volleyed at the enemy. The first unit of cavalry ran up to the enemy lines. She couldn't tell who was leading it. Their head burst like a balloon. The ground underneath the Queen's feet began to freeze over. Another group of cavalry assembled, ready to strike at the other flank. She could see one with red hair leading the formation. Part of the enemy line rotated to face the horsemen. The hoof-beats took on a thunderous tempo. A cloud of smoke, the horse stumbles, the rider flinches. Stronger than one. A man forms out of ice. He begins to run towards the foe. The rider steadies herself, the horse continues its course. She couches her lance, swings her horse to point directly at a hapless soldier. Cavalrymen lift their sabers up. Stronger than ten. The horsemen impact. Lances go straight through hearts, carbines are discharged at point-blank range. The ice man grows larger, snow flakes being sucked towards him, an icy vortex forming around his body. Men are made into mince meat. Sabers slice gracefully through heads, jaws detach from skulls. The Austrians are threshed like wheat. The air is filled with the sounds of squishing meat, cracking bones, and wails of agony. Stronger than a hundred men. The ice man has become a giant. The Austrians are completely unprepared. They try to fire at the beast. It does nothing. Cannons fire at it. They do nothing. The monster roars. A row of men are frozen in their tracks before being shattered instantly. The

formation breaks, they try to run. The force of wind and snow sucking in towards the creature prevents them. There will be no escape from the battle. The French cavalry have stopped, just watching now. The abomination slams its fists into the earth and spikes sprout from the ground in concentric circles. Boys are impaled on the icy spears. Their mouths contort in agony, the expressions frozen in pleading wishes for mercy. A cannon crew tries to scan the beast for weaknesses; it senses the threat. A shard of ice flies towards the gun, it backfires. The crew is splattered all over the ice and their comrades. Luckily, their friends do not have time for disgust. The wrath of God is already upon them. They stand before it and are judged. Today, no one will be worthy.

Its job complete, the demon collapses. So does Elsa. A figure steps forward. Her minder. He is only in his fifties, but in this moment, he looks far, far older. He is truly a beast for what he's doing, but it's necessary. He has to do it. He has to do it for his friends, for his family. For Belle. Besides, this brutality would show the monarchies of Europe that resistance was futile. The age where kings and nobles could callously disregard the feelings and needs of the downtrodden and repressed was over. The revolution must spread. Still, he shuddered. He picked up the sleeping beauty gingerly, taking care not to be too rough. He brought her back to her tent. Elsa would have a dreamless sleep.

Ice cannot heal, only preserve. And nothing can be preserved forever. When the ice thaws, the bodies will rot. Vultures will come, pick over the meat. The autumn sun would shine, the heat would bring decay. By the time the winter breezes blew, there would be nothing but bones, bleached to a snow white. Ice cannot heal.

Bonaparte

There is a magic and beauty to the Eternal City that cannot be described by words. There is a wonder to Italy that cannot be known easily. Once upon a time, Europe bowed before Rome. Napoleon had been to Italy before. You could even say that he was born there. And now, he was returning. He had already seen, and conquered. This time, he wanted the city to kneel.

The pope was waiting for him. He could wait a while longer. Napoleon took the air in deeply with each breath. He let the ancient power of the city flow through him. Today was a day unlike any other. The Holy Roman Empire was a sham. It was not Holy, it was not Roman, and the Emperor was anything but. For the first time in over a millennium, nay, for the first time in forever, Europe would have an Emperor. The Romans had never conquered all of Europe. He would. The Romans faced tribes and primitive states. His foes were Great Powers. His imperial dignity would be the greatest the world had ever known. He took his seat. They prayed. Did they pray to God, or to him?

He walked slowly towards the altar. The pope was about to crown him. He struck first, taking the wreath and crowning himself. He then crowned Josephine, his beloved Empress.

With that act, Napoleon passed forever into immortality. A crown had been given unto him. And lo, I saw him open the second seal. Then went out a red horseman, with the power to take peace from all the nations, and there was given unto him a great sword.

Corpses under Olive Shade: Intermission

A boy sat under an olive tree, his eyes glassy and blank. Snow dusted his brow and hair, tinting them a cold white. His name had been Jacques. His name would go unremembered. What had he wanted? He had wanted fun. He had wanted glory. He had wanted freedom. He had received none of it, and been undone. His rifle, twisted and broken, lay beside him, shaped like some perverse shepherd's crook. A snail crawled up a blade of grass, munching happily. A worm burrowed through the ground, churning and fertilizing. A sparrow flew overhead.

And a queen, in a meadow not too far, but not too close, wept.

Across the sea, an experiment begins. Land is bought to found a town called Harmony. Eventually, with the New Harmony colony, it will spread the promise of peace by advancing the cause of science. For now, peace is a distant lie. There is only ceasefire, and the hunger of nations.

It had been eighteen hundred years exactly since Tiberius conquered Germania inferior. But from the bloodshed, it looked like barbarians lived there still.

Convention

"Daddy, what are we watching?" asked the tyke, a short and chubby child about six years old, with light brown hair.

"It's called Frozen," said Riley.

"Is it as good as Moana? What about Zootopia, Tomorrow Land or Lion King?" asked the other child, a small girl, four years old, almost five, with platinum blonde hair.

"Better," replied their father.

He checked the time. 2:14PM, 2/9/2022. The convention had been delayed nearly a month by very heavy snows. He resisted the urge to check those doubles. It would be incredibly silly for a man his age. He pulled into the parking.

"Everybody out of the car. The show starts in six minutes, and we shouldn't be late."

The show opened up with a 3D animated short, like the kind you would get at the parks. By the end, the whole theater was in stitches. Then the movie started. They oohed and aahed at the Let it Go scene. His kids gasped when Hans revealed his treachery. One woman in the back shouted out, "He's up to no good!" When the credits started to roll, there was a round of applause from the whole crowd. His kids started to leave, but he stopped them.

"Not yet. There's a special scene after the credits, and a special treat inside them."

Sure enough, near the end of the credits, he suddenly pointed up. His kids' jaws dropped.

"Is that your name daddy?" asked the girl.

"Sure is. Historical consultant."

"Whoa. So coool," said the boy.

He brought them back to the car.

"You know, the queen looks a lot like mommy," said his son.

"I'm dropping you off at the hotel, I have to go to the conference. Be good for mommy, ok?" said Riley.

"Sure. I pinky-promise," said his daughter. He noticed crossed fingers out of the corner of his eye, and smiled.

Later that day, he approached the podium.

"Introducing the Chair of German History at Harvard University, Riley Aslaugssen!"

"Thank you speaker. As we all know, history is important. But history is the story of mistakes just as much as it is the story of success. For every great victory in history, there were a thousand tiny defeats. And for every act of great nobility, there were a dozen petty tragedies. When we look back at history, it can be easy to judge these mistakes. But we are history. Every day, we make history. Our decisions, one day, will be written down in a book by dusty old professors just like us. And rest assured, we have made mistakes to. Don't judge the past by the mistakes. Learn from them. Recognize that those mistakes just made them human, just like it makes us human. Remember to err is human; to forgive is divine. Let the 2022 American Historical Association convention begin."

Carrara

Elsa woke up. Anna was waiting by the tent entrance.

"Hey there sleepy-head. How are you doing?"

"Anna! Are you alright?"

"Course I am! It was only a grazing shot, nothing for a strong and brave hussar like me. You know Joan of Arc was shot through the neck and lived? Anyways, what about you? That was amazing! You stopped the whole enemy army single-handedly."

"Yeah..."

"I mean, first I saw a few snowflakes, then this big old snowman runs over and knocks everyone over." Anna smiled. "Now I wanna build a snowman."

"I murdered them. They would have surrendered and I killed them all."

"Well... you can think of it this way... they were living under a bunch of tyrants, so by killing them, you really freed them. You freed the shit out of them. They're just a little bit chilly now. Little, tiny, itty-bitty bit."

"You don't understand, I didn't even mean to kill them. I was just so scared. I thought you were going to die. I thought I was going to die. I heard cannonballs whizzing over us, I saw you get hit. I lost control. Those people... they'll never see their friends or family again. They're gone."

"Pierre Allais."

"What?"

"Michael Aberjonois. Jean-Luc Bellegarde. Antoine Vernier. Jacob Watteau. They died in that charge, and that was just the start of the battle. What would've happened if the battle dragged on? More people would've died, Elsa. We'd end up killing them anyways, Elsa, but we'd have lost more men. There's no such thing as a perfect battle-except for the one you just made."

"Anna, you don't get it! I'm a monster!"

"No, you're not. You're my sister, and you're the best sister anyone could have. The men love you, you saved their lives. I love you too. You can't beat yourself up over this. You look tired. Get some more sleep, we're crossing into Italy this week."

Anna closed the tent flap, and the Gates of Hell opened wide behind Elsa. Giant clammy, gray hands burst from it, and dragged Elsa in. She screamed. All around her were the pale shades of thousands of ethereal petitioners. Lines stretched back into the horizon, endless queues of the damned. She tried to stand up, only to feel a boot pressed against her back. She looked up, and it was the pope.

"An unholy demon like you wishes to march into the city of God? You will never be allowed to blaspheme against Rome! May God have mercy on your soul."

She felt their presences draw nearer and nearer. The souls of all those lives she had cut short. She tried to scream again, but couldn't. One of the spirits tore out her throat. The others set about their grisly business, literally ripping her to shreds. She felt their ghostly hands reaching deep inside her, felt an unimaginable pain as bit by bit she was disassembled. The ground burst and cracked, and she fell into a pit of hellfire. Her skin cracked open and blistered, the fat melted from her bones, the muscle charred. Her eyes poured out of their sockets, liquefied by the heat. There could be no mercy, would be no mercy for someone like her. She had sinned far too deeply against the Almighty.

Elsa woke up in a cold sweat. Anna was waiting by the tent entrance.

"Wakey-wakey. Breakfast is done. We've got stale biscuits, bad coffee, old beans, weird meat, and the daily special is... dah dah dah dah, olives! Procured by yours truly. How's the Hero of Baden doing today?"

"Urghh..."

"Awww, you look grumpy. You should eat some olives, that'll cheer you up. They're soooooooooo good, and fresh too."

"I'm sorry, I don't want any olives."

"You sure? I worked really hard for them. Acquired them from a local farm. We had to deal with an enemy patrol. Luckily, we got the jump on them."

"Go away Anna."

"Okay... bye."

"Wait! Please don't go, I didn't mean it. I'll try some of your olives."

"Fantastic! I'll mix them up with some weird meat. I keep the meat in a locker by your bed. The cold keeps it fresh. Weird, right? Weird meat."

"What is weird meat?"

Anna shrugged.

"No idea, but I can do all sorts of things with it. Weird meat casserole, weird meat pies, weird meat salad, weird meat a la Bonaparte, weird meat sandwiches, weird cheesy meats, weird meatbread, weird meat stew, weird meat gumbo, pickled weird meat. Tastes way better than jerky. I love weird meat."

"Okay. Could you make me some? I trust your judgment."

"Sure. What kind?"

"Uhhhh..."

"I'll just go with weird meat sandwiches. That's a classic."

Elsewhere in the camp, engineers readied their cannon. The Third Coalition had realized its mistake, and rather than try to fight while being pressed from two sides, instead marched towards Carrara, in attempt to evacuate by sea. If the army could storm the defenses and seize the city, it would certainly demoralize the Third Coalition and give Napoleon an excuse to crown himself King of Italy. If they escaped, they would surely return. The British Navy was incredibly potent, and once on the seas, the enemy would have free reign to deploy where they wished. Spring had sprung, along with new hope for the forces of reactionism. Winter may have been on Napoleon's side, but the seas were with Britain.

Carcass

"I am an irresponsible drinker!" - From the hit single Revolutions of 18 4d8s by the Mildewed Monarchists

"Intelligence indicates Arendelle will be joining the side of the French Republic. Find a counter to ice powers. Go."

"Burn it?"

"One million pounds. Make it happen. You have five years."

"Do you have any idea what we're doing?"

"Nope."

"How about we wangle the doohickey until the sprocketing?"

"Alright."

"The Greeks had something like this, right?"

"I think they did."

"If they could do it a thousand years ago, we can too."

"Why do they call it quicklime, anyways?"

"Neat. It burns. Can we shoot it?"

"So... is it Greek fire?"

"Probably not. But it's close enough."

"GREEK FIRE! OIL FIRE! NOW ICE WITCH IT'S YOUR TURN!
SERVE BRITAIN'S EMPIRE. BE OURS OR YOU WILL
BUUUUUURNNNNN!"

"Please stop singing, you're scaring me."

It was far, far too quiet. Men held their breaths, afraid to speak. It seemed like the sound would be sucked out of their bodies if they did. The city did not seem fortified, but appearances could be deceiving. Men were marching in, but there was no fighting. It seemed as if the enemy was abandoning the city to them. Fortifications went unmanned, buildings undefended.

There was the soft patter of boots on cobblestones, but no gunfire. There was the easy sound of water lapping up against the beach, but no booms of artillery.

Snow golems led the way, created reluctantly by Queen Elsa. Did they think? Did they fear? Were there souls in those lifeless crystal eyes? Were they alive? A soldier couldn't help but ask those questions as their noiseless guardians pushed forward.

The silence is broken. The whistling of a cannonball. It slams into one of the golems with a dull thud. More follow, screeching their way through the air. Moments later, their purpose is revealed. Fuses finish burning inside, and fuel ignites. Great gouts of fire sprayed from inside the shots, melting man and snowman alike. Men begin to panic, to flee. Missteps are made. A click, a blast. A man bursting into flames, melting like marshmallow. From their hiding spots, the enemy strikes. In the narrow streets of the city, the muskets of the French offer them no ranged advantage. The fire reaches over, narrow fingers reaching from walls and windows. It licks them, covers them, caresses them. Sensual, smothering, it spreads over them. They are weak, they lack endurance. They crumple up and

sleep. The fire does not mind so long as there is more. It is so warm, so giving. It spreads. A thousand hugs, a thousand kisses. It casts its enveloping net over the city. It is very difficult to force a horse into spears, and it is the same with men and fire. At the same time, the fire entrances them, it seduces them. There is no choice but to look away, to run, but the temptation of Sodom is too great and will always be too great. She spreads, but wonders why. The men all run, are all afraid. She has a million grasping hands, a million smiling maws, a million loving eyes, but yet they fear. She spreads more slowly. Her beauty is intoxicating. Men look in, their breath taken away. They are stupefied, they collapse. She does not mind. She is a patient lover, so long as she is satisfied. But the many continue to scorn her.

She mouths once, twice, a dozen times, the names of her lovers. All of them would abandon her in time. She ceases her spread. Rome, Pforzheim, Constantinople, Halifax, Moscow, Hamburg, London, Peshtigo, Dresden, Darmstadt, Trang Bang, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Prometheus. An incantation, spreading through the air, held by the whispering wind. A magic beyond magic, a pact made with man in a time before time, long ago in a muted storm. A pact of passion and love. A pact often broken. The fire blows back on itself, pensive. Then, it begins. There is no wrath like hers. She stands up, rises into the air. Her arms stretch out, whirling, unstoppable. They strike the ground and suck men in. The sky blackens in fear. Ash rains down, the tears of a raging storm.

Elsa watched. The ice would not form. The snow refused to show. There are queens, and then there are empresses. The Gates of Hell had opened.

It had only been a trial run.

Aboard their ships, they watched. It had been a success beyond their wildest expectations. They would burn the cities, feed the crops to their empress, and prostrate themselves. Napoleon would march, feasting on ashes with every step. And when battle was given, she would come and dispense her love. They had hoped it would

happen. Kerosene, quicklime, napalm, white phosphorus. These were the tokens, offered many times by men. Fortunately, she was not a jealous lover. It did not matter if a hundred, a thousand, or even a million starved. It would be consummated.

Cog

Human beings are creatures of habit. It was remarkable how quickly one could acclimate to the most bizarre of situations. Every day went pretty much the same way. Elsa would have a nightmare (today's was an army of Hans clones trying to kill her sister), and wake up in a cold sweat. She would lie back and think about the morality of creating sapient snow beings just to send them to their deaths. Her sister would peek her head in, tell her to wake up, and announce breakfast. It was usually some sort of weird meat dish with biscuits and bad coffee. Then she would begin the day's work, if you could call it that. She would read some philosophy first. After that was history. Then came economics. She made it a point to keep up with the latest advances in the field, and she had piles of her own scribbled notes. Perhaps one day, if she had the time, she would compile them into a theory. She would take a break and have lunch. Lunch was usually a thin gruel accompanied by the lunch special, the lunch special being whatever Anna and her procurement specialists could loot from nearby hapless peasants. Then it was back to work. There would be no laws, so she took it upon herself to fabricate scenarios and design policies to counter said problems. It paid to keep skills sharp. She would revise her letters to Professor Paulus. She had sent in a critique of commentary on the New Testament a few years back, and soon found herself engaged in correspondence. Unfortunately, the war had cut that short. Thuringia was under Austrian occupation. After that came mathematics and natural philosophies. Late into the night she would make calculations and ponder solutions. Snowflakes were the main problem. She was certain that they could be described, indeed, she felt it in her bones. She consulted mathematical notes from Leibniz and Newton. She attempted to apply principles from other fields. Her copy of the *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* was practically unreadable with annotations. For now the problem remained unsolved. The day exhausted and the night growing old, she would crawl back into her bed and sleep. As it turned out, the business of

war was more about walking around and nicking people's food and less about actual fighting. It was almost charmingly banal.

Right on schedule, Anna peeked her head through the tent flap.

"Wakey, wakey, it's eggs and not quite bakey!"

"Good morning Anna."

"Awww, somebody looks like a big old sourpuss. Fire still weighing you down? Lasalle gave me some advice that really helped. He drinks, he fucks his wife, then he's ready to die for France."

"You don't have a wife, Anna."

"I know. I replace that step with another round of drinking."

"Who's Lasalle?"

"Lasalle. You know, Lasalle. Hussar? Adventurer? Brave? Bold? Gallant? Great at parties? All around fun guy? No? Hmmm. Well, what about Pierre? He collects ears. Nope...? Do you know anyone?"

"Not really."

"Wait, wait, wait. Do you even leave this tent?"

"Not often."

"You should go out more. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Elsa! I meet so many interesting people here. Like Baptiste! Did you know he set himself on fire three times? And only the first two were accidents!"

Elsa thought about it for a moment, then grinned.

"Never change, Anna."

Anna beamed back in gleeful noncomprehension.

"Uhhhh, okay! Anyways, you should really come hang out. It's loads of fun. We drink, we smoke, we play cards, we swap raunchy sex stories..."

"You don't have any raunchy sex stories."

"How do you know? What if I dress up like Kristoff and Kris dresses up like you? What if we smear chocolate on our bodies and whip each other?"

"I keep detailed personal and public expense reports on everyone in the castle as well as other persons of note, and I triple check them every day to look for corruption. I would notice."

"Well, you're right. But, hypothetically, we could've been doing that. How do you have time for that anyways?"

"I'm a dedicated civil servant."

He was also a dedicated civil servant. He was an everyman, and by everyman, I mean every project manager from now until the dawn of time. Like his archetype demanded, he was filled with a mixture of feelings. On one hand, these were some of the smartest people in the Empire. On the other hand, he was absolutely disgusted by their stupidity.

Sometimes smart men go uncredited by history. In laboratories around the world, graduate students slave away at projects, only for their teachers to receive all the credit. In science, the prestigious will get more prestigious, and the unknown will continue to lose their share of the recognition.

"Hey there boss. Trial run went perfectly, right?"

"You're telling me that you spent 90% of the product and almost all of the money on one battle?"

"Yeah, morale damage. That's how you win wars! I learned all about it from my history books and tabletop war games. They probably think good ol' Georgey's a fire spirit now."

"How are we supposed to fight any other battles now?"

"Well, you don't have to use that much. Should be fine to engage so long as there's enough fire to keep away the frost. We'll need a few months or maybe a year to brew up some more though."

"A year? A year? We don't have a year!"

"Relax. Just be like Jons over there. Look at how calm he is."

"Bork bork?" asked Jons.

"Heh. He doesn't understand a word of English. HELLO... JONS. I... AM... BRITISH."

"Bork," replied Jons.

"See?"

"He actually does speak English," said Sir Davy.

Jons Berzelius frantically shook his head.

"Anyways, you should be a little quieter. You'll wake up Dalton."

"He's only 40. He should have the energy to be awake."

"Yeah, but he looks way older. And really, isn't it the observable properties of a substance that matter?"

And sometimes, if history does not remember you, it is because the people writing it didn't like you.

Project Tartarus has been both a great success and a horrific failure. In the future, it is of the utmost importance that we watch our researchers carefully, and constantly have their funding at risk. In my opinion, they become a mixture of reckless and complacent when this is not the case. Unfortunately, we must save our campaigning for next year.

Coronation

"You intend me to wait longer? My family has waited hundreds of years while Arendelle has encroached on our lands, and now that the time is right, you expect me to wait?" raged Gustav IV.

"The situation has become unfavorable, your Highness," replied the diplomat. He was holding his tongue. He had a deep personal disdain for Gustav, who he regarded as a pompous buffoon.

"So this is England, then? A land where they might sympathize with the devil himself so long as it is convenient?"

"If I might speak, my lord, our position strengthens by the day. We have evacuated the greater part of the army stranded on the continent, and if we are able to force a naval engagement and win decisively, then Napoleon will be kept in check, for fear of a naval landing endangering France itself. Our demonstration of fire will make them wary of advancing in our territory, and if you hold your men in reserve, Arendelle might withdraw out of fear."

"I do not want Arendelle to withdraw, I want Arendelle to be mine. Do you not understand that Arendelle is ruled by a literal hellspawn? Kings such as myself are the arbiters of God's will on Earth. And God will not stand such a creature defiling the sweet north."

"Our spies indicate that United States forces are currently protecting Arendelle. If you were to make a move now, you would kill American citizens. Based on... prior knowledge, whether it was their fault or yours, the Americans will blame you, they will curse your name, and they shall redouble their efforts. Even the most just and light of taxes is viewed by them as a provocation. They are a wild people."

"And so they must be subdued. No race of men ought to be wild enough to serve the machinations of Satan himself."

"Napoleon is a great foe, and he must be stopped, but he is not Satan. Sweden depends heavily on British trade, your Highness. I would not tempt our wrath."

Gustav fumed. The diplomat looked on, solemnly. Inside, he felt a great welling up of happiness. He was certain the fool would make a mistake now, just to avenge his pride.

He was right. The Swedish army marched south through the Brenner Pass, woefully unsupported by Austrian or British men. It was a paltry 51000 regulars augmented by another 20000 in conscripts, totaling just over 70000 men. The French and allies, 55000 in strength, were outnumbered. But their army was wholly regular, composed of men who would not break in battle. In addition, those conscripts had been raised essentially illegally, violating established principles of the Swedish Army. Thus, the men there felt betrayed and would not die for such a petty cause. Furthermore, the ability of Elsa to create disposable ice soldiers meant that the Swedish had to strike first, strike quickly, and strike decisively, or else they would be overrun. The French had a commanding position overlooking the Adige, across from the modern town of Castello Plars. From their forested ridge, they could spot any enemies advancing across the plains in front, and movements to cross the river at another point could be spotted by a screen of reconnaissance cavalry before they were completed, which would allow the French to either reposition, or retreat and give battle at a more favorable place and time in the future. The French cavalry could charge from uphill down unto plains, using their momentum to crush the enemy, and the French batteries could sweep the fields with fire. In light of this, Gustav's decision to chase the French army stationed in Italy can be considered phenomenally foolish, and many have agreed that it was one of the decisions that led most decisively to his forced abdication less than a year later.

The Swedish officers forced to give such orders can truly be considered tragic men. Their choices were now limited to choices of

formation and other tactics. As military histories and their glories will tell you, this was no insignificant choice. A row meant more fire being output. A column was faster, quicker. It could slam into enemy lines and slice them apart. Squares, untouchable by cavalry. As crude as it was, battles were still often decided by bayonet and not bullet. The ability to make decisive shock actions was worth its weight in gold. Even fifty years later, successful charges would occur in the Crimean War. Even today, men who are *merely* fighting for their friends, families, and loved ones can be broken by the killing edge of professional men willing to invoke the ancient art of a charge. The French had already been hardened by years of war. The standing army of the Swedes, on the other hand, was living a life of faded glory. It was barely even a standing army, using a quasi-feudal system. The Frenchmen were lean and hungry. The Swedish could not be prepared for that. And Elsa, waiting in the wings, was making her choice. A decisive victory here would crush Sweden's forces and secure Arendelle against invasion. But was it worth killing so many? War was an extension of diplomacy, and diplomacy merely a portion of statecraft. Elsa was an excellent administrator. But the benign sounds of statecraft and diplomacy were mere masks-the game of words was bloody indeed, and war was simply diplomacy sans the velvet glove. Was Elsa an excellent monarch?

Deutschland: Intermission

It was the week before Christmas, during the fifth year of the reign of Rapunzel I the Divine, heir to Frederick William II the Mourner, heir to Frederick the Great.

A kidnapper was after the Queen. Rapunzel ran, across battlements and roof tops, leaping building to building. Her pursuer was persistent, agile, strong. He followed effortlessly, silent and graceful as a panther. She fired her pistol back at him. Either it missed, or it did no good, as her pursuer ran on as if nothing had happened. She jumped down onto a balcony, ran inside the building. He followed. She sprinted through the twists and turns of the palace, trying to shake him, but it seemed like he knew the place as well as the back of his hand.

Finally, Rapunzel came to a dead end. A box, overlooking the palace square (it was really more of a circle). She turned, backed up slowly towards the edge. The man walked up, closer and closer. A battalion of parading Kingdom Guards looked up...

"HAIL QUEEN RAPUNZEL. HAIL KING EUGENE."

... and saluted. The King cocked an eyebrow and took his seat. The Queen sat down next to him. Before them was a military parade, traditional just before Christmas.

"Y'know, this whole roleplay thing falls apart if the guards salute me at the end," said Eugene.

Rapunzel tossed her empty popgun to the side. She poked her fingers into his cheeks, and lifted the sides of his mouth into a smile.

"Don't be so grumpy Eugene."

Eugene leaned in, then grabbed Rapunzel and kissed her deeply. They embraced, then Rapunzel backed up, for a moment breathless.

Eugene, ever prepared, immediately responded.

"Looks like I caught you."

"Yup, I guess you did. Hey... I think I have another idea."

"What is it?"

"How about... I be Rapunzel, and you be Eugene."

"Hmmm. I think I like the sound of that. We can get to that as soon as the state dinner is over."

Both of them giggled like school children. The parade stretched on into the distance, worming its way all around the city of Corona. The military had been the Kingdom's pride and joy for years, and for them to disarm during the mourning period had been a sign of the misery that had plagued the king and his subjects. At the parade's conclusion, a cannon blast was sounded, and guards arrived to bring the royals to the dining hall. A medley of German princes had been assembled.

"Hey there everyone! I'm so glad you could all make it to my Christmas party instead of the Kaiser's," said Rapunzel.

The crowd chuckled. The lords of northern Germany had been meeting at Corona instead of Vienna for almost two centuries now.

"Anyways, I know the party is a little early this year, but we haaaaad to get some state affairs in order. So let's just get that done as quick as possible, starting from my left and going all the way around to my right. Saxony?" said the Queen.

"Ten thousand men have linked up with Army Group A. We are committed."

"Holstein?"

"Two thousand men, Army Group B."

"Weaseltown?"

"IT'S PRONOUNCED WESELTON, AND... and... and... is that piernik?"

"Yes."

"Piernik is my favorite. May I have some?"

"Sure, go ahead."

The Duke grabbed the plate and began to shovel spice cake into his mouth. You could barely hear it as he gargled out a "four thousand men to Army Group B".

This went on as Rapunzel circled the table. Finally, all forces had been accounted for. 30,000 men were defending the homeland, with 10,000 for the capital and surrounding regions. 170,000 Coronan soldiers were assigned to the Army Groups, along with 45,000 allied soldiers. These 215,000 men had been divided into two army groups of roughly equal size.

"So you may be wondering why we did this. Well, the Imperials are going to get a very nice Christmas present this year. The armies are currently in position to assault multiple enemy forces at once, as soon as Christmas comes. The enemy will be caught off guard, and will either surrender or be defeated with a minimum of fuss. It'll be an easy, bloodless victory. We'll be in Vienna by April. Speaking of Christmas presents..."

A grumpy looking man walked in.

"It is I, the STARMAN. If you have been of an unpleasant character this year, prepare to suffer the WRATH OF CORONA. BEHOLD. GIFT UNITS FOR THE LOYAL. FOR SAXONY. FIVE THOUSAND MEN FOR DEFENSE. FOR WESELTON, A NEW SHIP OF THE LINE. FOR THE FREE CITY OF BREMEN, FOUR CANNONS," barked the man. This went on, again, around the table. He then

retrieved several bottles of alcohol and began to place them at people's seats.

"BEHOLD, IT IS THE KRUPNIK. IMBIBE. DRINK THE HONEY VODKA AND BE AMUSED."

"Why are you being so grumpy?" asked the Queen.

"You replaced me with a horse once."

"Well, he did keep crime down," said the King Consort. "Plus, it was really funny."

"Yes. Criminals are afraid of a very heavy animal crushing their heads like a melon underneath his hooves. This is very worthy of mirth."

With business settled, the feast began in earnest.

Below, the beating heart of Coronan constitutionalism pulsed. Thousands of bureaucrats slaved away, producing reports and collecting data. Production of resources, training of men, status of defenses, taxes collected, distribution of food, happiness of the peasantry, all condensed down into neat numbers and analyzed. Analysis was built up, made into proposals. The names of the contributors, sealed away in envelopes. Proposals are compared by panels of experts, the worthiest being passed up. Bit by bit, hundreds of ideas are evaluated and stripped away, until only a few remain. These are passed up to the Queen for review, at which point the winning proposal is selected. The package is unsealed, and the authors given their due credit. It was an efficient system, and it ran like clockwork. No one dared to corrupt their duties or sabotage the process. First, there was the fear of discovery by one's peers, and second was the sheer amount of respect held for the Queen. She was near worshiped. For eighteen years, she had been lost, and the kingdom had mourned. Then, out of the blue, she had appeared, as if out of a storybook. It had revitalized the kingdom almost instantly,

and convinced noble and peasant alike that destiny smiled upon them.

Below that was the prison. It was very large, but mostly empty. Under the reign of Frederick William, the dungeons had been expanded over and over again. Crime had skyrocketed. There is such a thing as a national character, and Corona's was underneath a deep malaise. An observer once said that Corona was not a state with an army. It was an army with a state. When the Kingdom Guards had disarmed, and the army had stood silent, the kingdom faltered. Second sons could no longer join the military, and were forced to find other things to do. Countless merchants and craftsmen, engaged in the business of supplying the military machine were suddenly unemployed. The theft of the kingdom had caused its weapons to be sheathed, and the sheathing of the weapons had ruined the land, such that it seemed that the soul of the country had been stolen as well. With poverty and idle time came crime. As crime spread, it became less and less safe to work, until the nation was gripped by the vicious cycle of lawlessness. The Kingdom Guards were nigh impotent against such a threat, having only dusty old crossbows and cavalry sabers, which were still permitted and still effective, but limited in range. When Rapunzel returned, things began to reverse themselves. When she took the throne, the military-industrial complex returned to full strength. Jobs returned, wealth flowed again, and people began to work. As money spread, more and more tertiary fields like the arts returned. Although it was a common folk belief that it was the work of a horse, the end of crime was really the natural course of economics asserting itself.

Mostly empty, however, was not empty. And today, the kingdom had an unwanted visitor. Security had been greatly tightened. Eugene, former thief, had revealed all the little tricks and holes he had used, and those were dutifully patched. The reformed Stabbington brothers and those like them were recruited into a newly formed secret police, organized into death squads, and scrubbed from the records. Threats were dutifully identified and eliminated. The stranger,

however, had learned to stay invisible and keep a low profile. He had to, what with his resentful siblings. He slipped past the guards, occasionally offering a bluff. He was important. He was a diplomat. He was supposed to be here. Act like you belonged, and you would. Nobody would question it. He walked, he found breaks in line of sight and disappeared down alleys. He crept his way closer and closer to the prison. The guard there, a young Junker's son. He was filled with national pride. His older brother served in the bureaucracy, and he did what he could. The stranger planned his approach. He had a window of opportunity for precisely five minutes. Luckily, his internal clock was perfect, one of his many talents. He walked up. The guard, confused, raised his hand, tried to stop him. He walked closer. The guard reached for his gun. A hand, heavy and firm, pressed against the guard's mouth. Another hand grabbed a knife and slit the guard's throat. A quick guess and the keys are found. The door is unlocked. He quickly moves down the halls, goes deep into the prison. He unlocks a cell, leaves the confused middle aged man there before. Sprints down, unlocks a second cell. He turns around, the man has followed him. Just as expected.

"The Stabbington Brothers, I presume," says the man.

"We ain't Stabbingtons no more. Got disowned when we were thrown in here," replied one of the old men.

"You are now. Your poor younger brother was executed by the regime, and his sons were killed too. The cruel old queen even scrubbed them from the census data. Not a single trace of them left."

"I don't give a damn about that. I haven't seen my brother here for sixteen fucking years."

"And you want revenge? Walk with me." asks the man. He smiles, but his eyes are filled with a steely contempt.

"The hell do you think?" replies one of the brothers, now walking alongside the handsome stranger.

"Of course. That's all men like you want. I can give it to you. The queen is the only child and heir of Frederick William, the tyrant that locked you up. She has cousins. I want you to kill them, to hurt her. Understand?"

"I got the same Christmas gift this year as I got every year. Mercy." He spits out the word. "Mercy, they call it, Coronan mercy. You see, the punishment for high treason is supposed to be the boats. They feed you, make you wallow in your own shit in the middle of a lake while bugs nibble on you, and then you die. But they're merciful, ever so merciful. So instead, they only flog me until my back is raw, and keep me from seeing my brother. No sun. Dead air. Some days, no water. Have to drink my own piss. For sixteen fucking years. Sixteen fucking years of mercy. Those orders... well, they're crystal clear."

"Excellent. I have a boat waiting, and we can make our escape post-haste. Gentlemen, you can call me Hans."

Divinity

"You were completely right Anna."

"Great! What was I right about, again?"

"The war. I can't save everyone, but I can at least save the people I care about."

"Awesome! So you're going to fight?"

"Yes. I just need to focus."

The Swedish plan was simple. The biggest and only real advantage Sweden held was in its numbers. As a result, the conscripts would be sent in first, to maximize their usefulness before they broke and ran. Infantry squares of regulars would guard the flanks and keep the French from using their cavalry to break in. The conscripts would try to cross the river in rows. Since they marched in rows, it would minimize the effect of artillery, and maximize the amount of fire they could output. They would break if engaged in melee, but the conscripts would break in melee regardless of formation, due to their lack of training. After the conscripts had taken the brunt of the enemy fire and artillery, the regulars would move forward in fast moving columns, and shatter the enemy with their bayonets. A simple plan, but one that would not succeed.

It is difficult to march in rows. It may seem simple to rotate or reverse, but if a hapless commander allows his men to move as they would naturally, the formation soon becomes disordered and useless. People do not have perfect senses of direction, and what seems straight can easily be crooked. Lines can slant and stray to the side with the utmost ease. As such, soldiers must be drilled to march or counter-march in the proper way. In the chaos of battle, things can blur into a haze, and movement, being key to battle, must be known in one's bones, must be committed to muscle memory.

The column is quick because the column is a more natural way to move. It does not require special training to follow the man in front of you, even if he breaks into a run. But when battle goes awry, then panic may override even training, and soldiers might flee with wild abandon. Many of the casualties in a battle don't occur in the battle itself, but in the rout.

The battle began. The waves of conscripts waded into the river, fearful and apprehensive. No response came from the French. Elsa struck once most of the conscripts and some of the regulars had entered the river. The river instantly iced over, freezing everyone caught within. The infantry squares braced themselves for an enemy charge, only for spikes of ice to suddenly sprout up inside their blocks and in their lines. The enemy defenses weakened, the French cavalry began their charge downhill. Then Elsa willed the ice in the river to take shape. Snow golems formed from it, then the corpses lodged within were extruded to the surface, such that the beasts looked more like shambling mounds of corpses than beings of ice and snow. This would be the last thing the Swedes would see clearly, as blizzards suddenly whirled into existence around them.

The world was whited out. All you could hear was the howl of the storm and the thunder of hoof-beats. Otherwise, you were alone with the knowledge, the terrible knowledge that the meat things shared the storm with you, and it was kind to their nature and vicious to yours. Those that managed to stumble out of the blizzard were dead all the same. The cavalry hadn't actually charged into the blizzard, as it would've blinded them as well. Instead, they circled the blizzard, shooting, trampling, or slicing apart anyone that escaped.

The regulars to the back of the army lost their nerve and began to flee. But the retreat of the enemy army is not sufficient for total victory. The enemy's spirit must be completely and totally broken before it will yield. Men forget easily, and in a few weeks' time they might rally and march once more, and this time with more prudence. A message had to be sent, and Elsa was learned in the ways of theology.

When a message was to be sent, it was sent on the wings of angels. Angels are not kind. Angels do not sing. Angels are sublime to behold, in the original sense of the word. They are a beauty tempered by pure terror and awe-inspiring power. From the ice came a great host of creatures. Lions with the face of men and the wings of eagles wielding frosty sabers, wheels within wheels covered in eyes that shot beams of ice, six-winged avian men, and chimeras of all kinds. They took flight on the wings of icy winds. Cold, lifeless hands burst from the ground, trying to grab men as they fled through the forest. If they failed, the hand would rise up out of the earth, a body forming beneath it, and it would pursue, made in the shape of a dead soldier. Blasts of ice filled the forest. Men hit by them were frozen. A miss did not mean safety, though. Misses went into trees, causing the sap to freeze and quickly expand, which led to the tree exploding into a flurry of wooden shrapnel. Snowflakes stopped their descents in mid air, convulsing and forming into icy shades, shades screaming the voice of a howling wind. Of the 70,000 that took the field that day, less than 13,000 would live to see the next dawn. They did not live because of any special courage or skill possessed. They lived by the whim of the Snow Queen. It had been a calculated mercy. Without survivors, there is no one to spread the fear.

Elsa stood on the ridge, watching the battle. If you must strike, strike first, and strike last.

Domination

For the first time in forever, Germany had been unified in truth as well as in name. Not since the time of Charlemagne had such a feat been done. For the people of Corona, it was proof of Rapunzel's nigh-divinity. That February, Rapunzel would conceive her first child, the future Elizabeth Christine, named after her mother. It is perhaps one of history's cruel ironies to consider that the kidnapping of Rapunzel had saved Frederick William's marriage. By all accounts, he was a heretical mystic (perhaps the only reason he had the people seek a cure to the Queen's disease was his fascination with magical cures), a hedonist, a layabout, and a womanizer. It may be shocking to consider, but he even been slightly disappointed when Rapunzel had been born, as he desired a son instead. The kidnapping changed all of that. He learned to love and stay faithful to his wife. His love of art was channeled towards productive means, including the modern Lantern festival and the construction of the Brandenburg gates. His hedonism and idleness turned to a solemn melancholy and introspection. He died only a few years only after his daughter's return. Some accounts reported that his old heart, so accustomed to mourning, could not take the happiness and burst. He died a good man, utterly reformed from the scandalous boy he had been.

The fall of Germany had occurred swiftly and relatively bloodlessly. On Christmas, the Coronans neutralized two of the strongest non-Austrian forces still in Germany. The rest of the German states were unable to field a large enough resistance, and they did not have enough time to organize into a coalition. Ultimatums were given. Either surrender and pledge absolute loyalty and service to Corona, or be invaded and replaced by a puppet government. A chain reaction took place, and one by one, the German states surrendered. The Austrians, still waiting overseas, were unable to defend Vienna. The Coronans simply marched in.

There was some minor resistance. A patriot, the tragic Andreas Hofer, unwilling to see the conquest of Germany by those he saw as foreign conquerors and traitors to their own German identity, organized a rebel army. It was almost obscene how Coronans were willing to side with French invaders to destroy the spirit of German independence and liberty that had persisted so long. The Holy Roman Empire was built to protect the sovereignty of the individual states, and now the Coronans trampled all over that. He led an army of 12,000 men against Army Group B. They were slaughtered. Many of the rebels were farmers or tradesmen, unaccustomed to modern war. Untrained villagers proved no match for the highly trained and motivated Coronan army. Almost all of the rebels were captured. Their punishment would prove to be an issue. The army had no dungeons, no way of keeping so many people. If they punished them as enemy combatants, it would imply that they had valid cause and that Corona was indeed a foreign presence. If they were punished as rebels against Corona, that would imply that Corona was ruler of Germany, when, at the moment, it was nominally only first among equals. In the end, it was decided to punish them as rebels against the puppet governments, with Corona performing the executions as a public service. 10,000 of them were flogged forty times then released to return to their homes. 1000 of them, viewed to be a greater threat, were beheaded in the traditional manner. Then, 200, seen to be ringleaders, were convicted of high treason. Army surgeons amputated all of their limbs, and the torsos were hung from trees, left to starve and dehydrate. Andreas Hofer stayed brave in the face of death. The officers interpreted that as impudence. He was amputated as well, but his eyes were sealed upon, and he was hung from a long pole, forcing him to watch as his comrades all died. These acts would be condemned as "oriental monstrosities" by the British press, and would lead to Corona abolishing all forms of execution except for beheading in 1818.

With the fall of Germany, the conquest of Italy, and the willing submission of Iberia, the Coalition of the Rhine held all of mainland Europe. German nationalists rejoiced, savoring the thought of a Greater German Reich with Rapunzel as Kaiserin. Others cringed,

fearing the loss of German culture. Coronan rule would inevitably mean the spread of Polish customs, and perhaps the loss of the German identity. When Poland had undergone its final partition a decade before, the idea of Poland had realigned itself to Corona, as the Coronan court was bilingual and celebrated a great deal of Polish traditions. Polish merchants, intellectuals, and warriors had streamed into the Coronan court, bringing their expertise with them. With the power of Corona seemingly indisputable, a new issue was being advanced. First of all, so long as there was no secure land route to Arendelle, Rapunzel's cousins would be at risk-and any land path would pass through Russia as well as Sweden. Secondly, much of Poland had been lost to the Russians in the partitions. Polish nationalism was now at a fever pitch. Everywhere people were whispering that the time was right. The ideals of the French Revolution had great appeal to the long-suffering Polish. It was absolutely necessary that all of Poland be united underneath one ruler. The Polish peasants would suffer no longer under the reign of oppressive and autocratic Tsars. Corona would reclaim the lost Polish clay, and Rapunzel would become the rightful ruler of all the German and Polish peoples. A Greater German Reich would be created to last a thousand years.

An invasion of Russia now seemed inevitable.

Dark of the Night

Anna and several other cavalry officers were playing a game of strip poker. One unfortunate captain had already gone bust, and was now struggling to maintain his dignity. Lasalle only had his pants, underwear, and cavalry saber left. Anna was still fully clothed and armed.

"Full house. Looks like I win again gentlemen. Lasalle, your sword please," said Anna.

"I would rather go naked a hundred times before losing my sword," replied Lasalle.

"Pants then."

Lasalle began to undo his pants, when Sergeant de Orleans ran in, clearly panicked.

"Colonel Hohenzollern, I've lost track of your sister," he said.

"You win this round Lasalle. Adam, you check the usual spots. I've got a hunch on where she is," said Anna.

Elsa looked over the cliff. The meadow was peaceful and serene. It was nice to be alone. Almost twenty years of isolation had made her used to it. Besides, the air was fresher and it was quieter away from the war camp. She laid down, closed her eyes, and listened to the river below. Time slipped away.

"Oi. Looks like Her Majesty has decided to save us the trouble of cornering her," said an unfamiliar voice. Elsa opened her eyes. There were two men standing in the meadow, middle-aged and burly. One had a strange-looking device that she recognized as one of the flamethrowers from Carrara, and the other had a rifle. She

scrambled to her feet and tried to shoot a blast of ice, only for a gout of fire to surge past her head. The meadow was starting to burn.

"Oh, don't worry about the cold, your Majesty. We're very capable of... turning up the heat. Now then, we're going to take our time and enjoy this."

Both of the men laughed.

"Get the hell away from my sister, you creeps!"

Their laughter was cut short by the sharp retort of a shotgun. A slug tore through one of their bodies, spraying bits of entrails onto Elsa, looking every bit like little maggots. The surviving Stabington turned and tried to open up his flamethrower, but Anna threw her empty shotgun into his face, causing him to jerk back and shoot the flame too high. Anna slid under the fire and punched the man in the gut, causing him to flinch and drop the nozzle, which fell to his side. Anna then threw a haymaker with one hand, which was blocked. But he had opened his side up, and Anna threw a quick jab to his kidney. The meat soaked it and he grunted. He brought his arms down and tried to grab Anna's head, but she pivoted and headbutted the spike of her helmet into the palm of his hand. He screamed and jumped back, giving Anna the time to draw her saber. The Stabington drew his broadsword. She brought a downward slash on him, which he blocked. He thrust back, and she dodged, but then he threw a punch with in other hand, hitting Anna. Then, he used another quick slice while Anna was off balance, knocking her saber from her hand. Finally, with one last movement, he brought the sword back for another cut, this one chopping up Anna's right eye. He then flipped the sword around, holding it by the blade, and began to hammer on Anna's helmet with the hilt. Each blow disoriented Anna, and she fell back onto the ground. The man sheathed his sword, and brought the flamethrower's nozzle back up, pressing it against Anna's forehead.

"Any last words before I cook you, girly?"

"Yeah. I'm an irresponsible drinker!"

Anna spit out an alcoholic mist through the flamethrower's pilot light, which ignited and spread onto the man's clothes. She picked her sword up and slashed at his knees, severing one. Then, with an upward thrust, she drove the feather of the szabla through his heart, and shoved him back. He toppled to the ground, flames making their way to the fuel on his back. Anna broke into a run, and tackled Elsa. They went flying over the cliff. As they fell, the elder Stabington exploded into a great fireball, disintegrating the pair's corpses.

"Elsa! Snow! Now!"

The river below transmuted into a pile of fresh powder, and a frigid wind slowed their fall. They smashed into the snow. Reason dictated that Anna now say a snappy one liner. She opened her mouth, dry heaved, then passed out.

"Colonel Hohenzollern? You'll be fine, but you'll never see in that eye again. I suggest you take some leave," said the doctor.

"That's fine. God gave us two eyes for a reason, right? Where's my sister?" asked Anna.

"She's over there, sleeping. She's running a fever, but otherwise there's no lasting damage."

Anna walked over to the bed where her sister was sleeping, and began to speak in a low whisper.

"Hey there Elsa. I really wish that I could say this when you're awake, but I know I can't. When I promised I'd protect you, I meant it. I prepare all of your meals myself, from forage to delivery. There's no such thing as weird meat, just meat I've personally made. Every morning I check up on you. I worry, Elsa. You always try to do everything yourself and solve everyone's problems for them, but we should be a team. You don't have to do it all, Elsa. I'm here for you. I wish you knew that."

Anna leaned over and kissed Elsa on the forehead.

"Sweet dreams, sis."

Dreams

On May 7th 1806, Sweden sued for peace. In exchange for a renunciation of all claims on Pomerania and Pomerania, and a war indemnity of 40 million francs, Sweden would be allowed to leave the war and would be incorporated into Napoleon's new European system.

40 million francs might seem like an incomprehensibly vast sum. But for a nation, it is a pittance. France spent more than 800 million francs a year, and not all of it on war. Even then, those war expenditures still fed the country. Money passing from hand to hand was really the passing of goods from hand to hand, and the money that went into the gunsmith's hand or the baker's would soon find itself in another's pocket. Over the course of the Napoleonic Wars, France would spend almost 120 million on ports, nearly 300 million on roads, 30 million on bridges, 120 million on canals and land reclamation, 100 million francs on public works in Paris alone, and 150 million on miscellaneous public works elsewhere. 500 million francs in one year dedicated to the French Army, with 15 million francs for just the purchase of steel to produce cannon. When you consider the vast amounts of money flowing through a government, the question becomes not why officials become corrupt, but why more don't. A theft of 1% of the state budget was a sum to make any pauper rich.

With Corona's new dominance over the German states, all the dominated states of western and southern German were now required to advance 10% of their annual revenue to Corona every year. For example, Bavaria took in roughly 1.8 million pounds of income per annum. In total, that came to almost 1 million pounds of taxes being paid as tribute to Corona. Consider that one chicken could be bought for twelve shillings, and that there are twenty shillings to a pound. That's 1.5 million chickens. You could recreate the legendary bursting of the dam by Queen Rapunzel and King Eugene with chickens instead of water. Now, they didn't do that. But

one of the proposals advanced in the Coronan bureaucracy went to that effect. When life gives you shillings, buy chickens.

As for Britain? They imported more than 10 million bushels of grain a year. They exported more than 10 million pounds sterling a year in manufactured goods alone. Britain alone was an island. But Britain was more than Britain, it was Great Britain, head of a global empire, the center of a thousand roads and sea lanes. Money flowed in from all seven seas and all four corners of the world. An army marches on its stomach, but a nation runs on its wealth. And the rule of India by the British East India Company was one of the jewels of this great realm. Robert Maldon was keenly aware of this fact, which was why he was currently presenting all of this to Napoleon. For him, the rebels at Tyrol had not been a tragedy. They had been an encouragement, a sign of things to come. If 12,000 could rise up and fight after such a brief occupation, then what might a people oppressed for years do?

Ancestry is a magic thing. It multiplies. If one man has two children with half of his blood, then those two children have two children with one fourth of his blood, and those four grandchildren have eight children with one eighth of his blood, then very quickly everyone has a bit of it. Take any old shmuck off the street, and it's very likely he's related in some way to ancient kings. True, the bridge may not happen immediately. Nobility did not like their morganatic marriages. But if a king marries a duchess, and a duke marries a count, and a count marries a baron, then soon the blood has entered the common folk. Robert Maldon was the direct descendant of Timur the Great in that respect. His track back to kingship gave him 1/32th royal blood. In fact, he had blood claims on other thrones too, little 1/128th and 1/1024th pieces written in his genetics. Indeed, you could say that he was an heir of a sort to every throne in India. And so the rightful king (of a kind) prepared to return. Robert Maldon, the man who would fight an empire, the man certain that he could topple the British East India Company.

After almost three years, Anna and Elsa were finally heading home. Robert Maldon was heading home too. Maldonia. The name had a certain majesty to it.

Death at Sea

Author Notes: This is not meant to imply cannibalism has occurred. This is meant to be an in-story of denial of it. I only brought it up at this point in the story because people kept asking if weird meat was people. Weird meat is not people. Stop asking.

Everything always looked more suspicious in a burlap sack. Or maybe it just looked suspicious because the sack was chunky and starting to bleed. It was also really suspicious that she was whistling, but whistling was fun. Luckily, Elsa never woke up before seven.

Elsa peeked her head out of her tent and spotted her. Shit. Think of something fast.

"It's a sack of blessings! I play a game where I count my blessings and put them in a bag."

"Why is it leaking?"

"Hope floats. Ice floats. Hope's made of ice, you know, and ice usually melts. Makes sense, right?"

Elsa sniffed the air suspiciously.

"That smells like... copper. Is that blood?"

"Noooo... no. Not blood. There's... there's a bread guy in this sack."

"A bread guy? Why is it bleeding then?"

"Duh silly, the bread guy is dead. I mean, there's no corpse in this sack. Just bread. And a bread guy. A living, not dead bread guy."

Elsa's face cycled through emotions, starting with shock, then disgust, then finally a damning sense of realization.

"Anna... is weird meat... people?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Then why on earth do you have that sack?"

"Be-because... bees. Yeah, bees. Bees and birds. Have I ever told the story about the birds and the bees?"

"This isn't the time-"

"So there's a bunch of birds, and a bunch of bees, right? And the Queen Bee is the leader of the whole hive, and she's got ice powers. And the birds want to have sex with the bees, especially the Queen Bee. But sex isn't really sex, it really means eat, because bees are delicious. Also, eat isn't eat either, because this is a metaphor and eat means kill. So they send birds with knives and guns to have sex with the Queen, and the Queen's sister has to get her hatchet out and have sex with them first, but sex is still killing, ok? And then two of the birds actually find the Queen Bee, and they breathe fire so they're like bird-dragons, so then the Queen Bee knows that there are rape birds everywhere, and then nine months pass and that's where babies come from."

"You've been killing people behind my back this whole time?"

Anna held her hands together sheepishly.

"Well, to be fair, I've been killing people in front of your back too. Remember all those charges I led? Besides, they were assassins."

"How many?"

"Okay, so there was that one awkward boy who kept pacing behind the camp, and I thought he had a gun but it was really a bunch of creepy porn drawings of us, then there was the Chinaman, and also that one guy with the eyebrows, the jugglers, the fat one... Hmmm... Ummm... Nineteen?"

"Nineteen...? Oh god, how long has this been happening?"

"Remember when I showed you all those soldiers that sang? The sergeant there also keeps track of you. Also, he used to be a big old monster man. I think you two would really hit it off if you talked. He had an angry peasant mob after him, you had angry peasants, he had a curse put on him, you can give people magic curses, he was a shut-in, you were a shut-in..."

"At least we can finally go back to Arendelle and put all of this behind us. It's been years since I had chocolate."

"Yeah... about that. I'm going to take a year break, but after that I'm reenlisting. Napoleon is promoting me to Grand Marshal, and the men will need me for the invasion of Russia."

"You're serious about this?"

"They're fighting for their dreams. I've started this, now I've got to stick things through."

"I'll reenlist with you then."

"You mean it? You're the best!"

Elsa gave a sardonic smile.

"Someone has to make sure you don't go on a rampage."

The dead man's head rolled out of the sack and Anna picked it up, sticking it on her hand. She projected her voice onto the meat puppet.

"Hey, the lady doesn't go around killing all the time."

"You're using a dead man's head as a puppet."

"I think you should be proud that I learned ventriloquism. And how to say ventriloquism."

The sisters prepared to cross the sea. Across the sea, the fate of Napoleon's empire was being decided. It is hard to describe what leads to greatness. Who could've said that Lord Nelson would become a legend? He was brave, but many brave men live just to die in the uncaring muds of a bloodied battlefield. He was innovative, but countless innovators are outshone and ultimately replaced by their innovations. He loved his men, but love can blind and lead to error. He was vain. He had an affair. Any one of these traits could describe thousands of men, and taking the conjunction only narrows things too much. Great men are not cast in a single mold, and for every one that resembled Nelson, there were a thousand others that were his opposite.

Naval battles had ceased to be conclusive. Although ships would often clash, the losers could flee without major harm. Some even suspected that decisive victories at sea were no longer even possible. But Nelson was bold, and he had a new idea. Instead of lining up his cannons against the enemy and trading blows until one side retreated, he would smash into them with a column and cut off their escape.

Fire ships had also fallen out of favor. Ships could become massive bonfires, but they were also maneuverable, and could avoid the obvious and short ranged threat of flame. But, if these weaknesses were countered, then fire could rule the day like it had in the storied years of Byzantium. With the French retreat blocked off, they would have to make long, slow turns to continue. During that time, small sloops-of-war could close the distance and begin their work. Disorganized and aflame, the British ships could destroy the French at their leisure. Thus the fleet was divided. Two squadrons of ships of the line would split the French navy, then sloops equipped with Greek Fire would throw the enemy fleet into chaos. The enemy would be unable to fight a proper battle, nor would it be able to retreat. The enemy would have a chance to direct raking fire through Nelson's ships, but even if it did so and disabled the warships, the sloops would still set the distracted enemies ablaze. And once the

British ships reached the enemy line, they would reply with their own raking fire down the entire French line. Sloops had fallen out of favor for full engagements, but in this battle they would be used to terrifying effect. The column approach was risky, but would ultimately devastate the French.

Thus, Nelson put to paper one of the boldest naval battle plans ever conceived. During the battle, he would be gravely wounded. If he had lived, perhaps his flaws would have eventually marred his image, or maybe a defeat would strip him of all his glory. But he died. He had lived as a man, but in death, he would be a legend.

Editorials: Intermission

1807 would be fairly peaceful as far as battle was concerned. The continent had been lost to the Third Coalition, which was soon officially replaced by the Fourth Coalition following Sweden's withdrawal and the forced exile of their now hated King Gustav. The Austrian and British were no longer contesting the continent, and Great Britain's naval dominance was now unquestionable. An end to direct fighting did not end the war for hearts and minds, however.

Hans had been quite industrious. Through a series of sham projects, corrupt officials, and "gifts", he had managed to siphon pieces of the Southern Isles budget from age 12 all the way until he was locked up in the dungeon. With intelligent investing and the security of overseas banks, his tiny fortune had multiplied. Money couldn't buy happiness, but it could buy a variety of tools to acquire it. Mercenaries had broken into the Southern Isles dungeons for him. He had greased a few palms and acquired a boat to England. From there, he had purchased fake documents and created a web of proxies and false identities. With those, he bought out a major newspaper and a variety of minor ones. Hans poured himself a glass of wine and relaxed in his study. The fire burned with a comfortable warmth.

Normally, the presence of rival newspapers discourages fraud. One paper can print a lie, but the other will print the truth, and the truth-teller will gain in prestige and power. But if enough newspapers can be forced to collaborate, then lies will be verified instead. Who would doubt something printed in ten separate papers? Even if someone tried to track back the sources, they'd find themselves mired in a web of fake people. If they pressed harder, all they'd find was his original fake identity, a mysterious oligarch, which was a satisfactory answer for the paranoid. His eighteen assassins had failed, he mused, but character assassination was just as good, if not better. No matter who won the war, the lies would stay. The lies would write the story for future generations and would persist in the public

memory. No matter what happened, their names would be marred for eternity.

Did the Hohenzollerns practice cannibalism? Certainly. Were they incestuous? Oh, absolutely. Were the Germanic courts full of orgies, decadence, and blood sports? Can there be any doubt? Did Rapunzel eat babies? It was guaranteed. Did King Eugene steal from the poor and give to the rich? All monarchs (except good old George) did, but he did it the most. Was Napoleon a midget? Sure, just check the figures. It didn't matter if the standards of measurement were a little different. The best lies had grains of truth. Queen Elsa and Queen Rapunzel were both hellspawn changelings sent to replace actual rulers. The Arendelle royal family engaged in regular bestiality. Elsa kidnapped and molested children in her ice palace. Human sacrifices were common, even expected. The Germans had reverted back to their ancient pagan roots and had shown themselves for the barbarians they really were. Even now they engaged in sun worship and satanic rituals. Rapunzel was the result of an affair between the devil and the Queen Dowager. These were kingdoms where royalty married peasants and horses led men. The natural order had been well and thoroughly overturned, replaced with a devilish mockery. The good Swedish king had been "exiled" because he had figured it out, and men had been sent to kill him. The French Revolution was really as demonic as it seemed-why else would they try to affect the overthrow of Christianity with some religion of reason and execute so many? The French were the ones that originally turned America against its loving mother country, and they continued their vicious puppeteering. The Germans had destroyed Rome, a great civilization, so long ago, and the time had come for them to destroy modern Europe. Unlike the proud British and the Romano-British King Arthur, the French were descended from Frankish barbarians. Now Europe was in danger of falling under a thousand years of darkness. Hans took another sip of wine.

As for Hans, his legend grew. The papers told tales of a boy born with a heart so naturally noble that all the vile temptations and overripe strumpets of the German courts could not sway it. The boy

was bullied by his brothers every day, and was almost sacrificed to the devil to gain his favor. His bastard father was always caught up in his schemes, and his godfather, Duke Weselton, was no better. The boy lived as a pawn. When the demon had awoken in Arendelle, he had been the only one brave enough to try and stop it. For that, they had tried to execute him thrice. Each time, God had intervened to save him. It was spectacular and unbelievable, which is why it would sell. Hans had found that people preferred sensationalism and wild stories so long as they had passed some minimum level of credibility. Hans would become a folk hero, and the restless men of England would flock to his cause. Once he had an army, he could attack. Two men stood between him and his birthright, the others were inconsequential. His father, and his godfather.

After almost two hundred years, Denmark would finally be reunited. Hans savored the flavor of the wine. It was a good one.

Experiment

The clipper slowly drifted into the bay, flying the flag of a neutral nation. As it drew closer to the harbor, it raised its flags and waited. After a few moments, the fort signaled back. Towers flanking the bay ground to life, their gears struggling to crank. A great spiked chain burst from the sea, dark and rusted. Ripples spread through the bay as its two brothers joined it in touching the sky. The lonely clipper passed under, flanked by the modernized Bergenhus, which now bristled with guns, and a newly constructed star fort.

The city was pitch black, every window boarded up. The only sound was the muffled thumping of boots as soldiers patrolled the streets. The market stalls and flower beds were gone, replaced by stakes and barricades. The mountain roads were no longer safe, having been well and thoroughly mined. Anyone wanting to leave or enter would have to be guided by soldiers using special charts. After the war, mine sweepers would be sent up to clear the fields, but not all of the mines would be caught. To this day, the Norwegian government cautions tourists against hiking in the North mountains, lest they join the casualty list of a long dead war. Walls, ditches, and other earthworks had been constructed along the mountain paths, allowing allied soldiers to harry the enemy every step of the way. The moon had hidden its face from the world, and the lanterns the sailors now lit could not compensate for its loss.

Anna rode her horse down the ramp. Kristoff was waiting for her. His big strong arms wrapped around her and carried her back home. Elsa shuffled down the ramp and walked back to the palace. That night, she dreamt of snow.

Nationalism is a difficult subject to tackle. There is an ethnic nationalism, in which a people form a nation, but in the distant past, many tribes existed where only one "unified" group does now. At what point is blood assimilated? There is a civic nationalism in which citizens are the nation, but what determines the right of a nation to

expand or to splinter? If it's defined by something as fickle as public opinion, then does it have any sort of stability? What determines the character of a people? The geography? The nature of their government? Some inborn characteristic? When do individual cultures lose their identity? What is a culture?

Each snowflake is unique. Despite this, there are certain patterns that emerge. Not all frozen water is created equally. Depending on conditions, it can be fluffy snow or unbreakable ice. Ice can be clear, cloudy, or even black. There is such infinite variety in what is all water. As Elsa lay in bed, eyes wide open, thoughts churned by a rhythmic pounding heard through the thin walls, the figures and fractals of snow mathematics began to make themselves clear. The snow lived. Elsa could give it life, make it think. Snow was not so different from man.

That night, Elsa began a thirty year project. In 1838, her book, *Treatise of Nations*, would be published. Using complex mathematical models and equations, and descriptions of snow through rudimentary forms of chaos theory, fractal theory, and recursion, it attempted to adequately predict and explain the behavior of population groups and how structures and hierarchies naturally form. To this day it still considered a historical landmark, the first serious and in-depth attempt to mathematize the social sciences. Math students even now are often brought to tears by the elegant simplicity of the formulas presented.

It is a slim and austere book, but word for word, it is one of the bloodiest books in history. Together with *The Communist Manifesto*, it would be one of the intellectual causes of the revolutions of 1848, and it has been cited by men as far apart as Martin Luther King and Pol Pot.

Elsa was a living embodiment of ice, which was merely frozen water. Human history had been dominated by water. Water fed crops, moved goods, was even the primary component of human bodies. Cities had been founded on rivers and oceans. Where water went, so did men, and where water disappeared, life withered away. But

the world was changing. That year, Fulton would demonstrate his steamboat, and an early internal combustion engine would be prototyped. No longer would men be tied to the tyrannies of a fickle sea. Canals would be replaced by railroads, and boats by cars and planes. With steel in hand, men could now reshape the world in their image.

The Treatise of Nations is more than just a book. It is an admission by a queen barely old enough to be a woman that the world was changing. It is an acceptance of obsolescence, as an age of ideas and iron replaced one of family politics and kings. The world was changing, and it could not ever be the same again.

Expansion of the Front

The Ottoman Empire had watched the events of the Napoleonic Wars with great concern. Selim III had been a great admirer of French ideals and western militaries, but the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon had proven that French men paled in comparison to French ideas.

Selim III had reformed the Ottoman army, and the newly reformed soldiers had been the only ones to give the French significant trouble. By making these reforms, he had also made many enemies. The Janissaries, once mere elite soldiers, had transformed into a political faction. With populist support behind them, the Janissaries led a coup deposing Selim early in 1807. However, the reign of the new Sultan Mustafa IV would not last long. Just over a decade before, the Ottomans had fought both Austria and Russia. Harsh times made for odd bedfellows. The Sultan's cousin, Mahmud, had been dispatched to open up diplomatic talks with Austria. These talks became ever more urgent as Napoleon's troops overran Austria, bringing ambitious Napoleon to the Ottoman Empire's borders. Mahmud's friend and ally, Alemdar Mustafa Pasha immediately summoned his Albanian and Bosnian retainers to invade the capital, but Mahmud did him one better. Austrian troops attacked, ending the reign of Mustafa before it had even really begun. Mustafa executed Selim and then committed suicide rather than be captured by the Austrians. With Selim and Mustafa dead, Mahmud was the obvious and rightful heir. Thus the reign of Mahmud II began.

From the outset, his situation was precarious. His armies had been weakened by wars against Russia, Austria, and France. The forces of populism and reactionism that had deposed Selim were still lurking, indeed, they had even been strengthened by his use of foreign aid. A government relies on its monopoly on force, but challenging the military meant putting that at risk. A hundred peoples lived under the Ottoman banner: Azeris, Armenians, Turks, Greeks, Arabs, Egyptians, Georgians, and the power of nationalism was

rising. To the west, Morocco, a US ally, looked hungry for land. The Ottoman Empire was in disarray, and this would be the perfect chance for Moroccan troops to invade the Ottoman vassal states that dwelled on the North African shore.

If the Coronans were successful in reuniting Poland and waging war using nationalism as a justification, then a thousand tiny nations would spring up and the Ottoman Empire would disintegrate. If the Empire was to survive, Corona would have to fail. Decisive action had to be taken. In order to prevent future insurrections, Mahmud had all Janissaries killed in their sleep, in an action that came to be called the Auspicious Incident. The army was replenished to a strength of 200,000 through mass conscription. With Austrian guns backing him, the officer corps was purged of disloyal elements. Next, Mahmud signed the Austro-Ottoman Secret Treaty. Austrian troops would train the new Ottoman Army. In exchange, Mahmud would strike as soon as the French and Coronan armies were overextended. Ottoman soldiers would flood into occupied Austria, then surge north and take Corona itself. Furthermore, both the Ottomans and the Austrians agreed to protect each other from the growing power of nationalism, and to actively suppress all nationalist revolts. After all, the Austrian Empire was multi-ethnic as well, and the collapse of the Ottomans would send a sign to nationalist rebels lurking with Hapsburg lands.

Portugal had always been a traditional ally of England. With British naval dominance now secured, Portugal openly sided with the United Kingdom, brazenly defying Napoleon's edicts. Without naval power, Napoleon would be forced to march through Spain. Spain was already a fair-weather ally at best. It seemed unlikely that the forage-as-you-go Grand Armee would make a good impression on the peninsula.

Across the sea, America grew weary. It was unable to project a serious force to the European conflict, and the American front was really not much of a front at all. Despite their independence, the United States was still an integral trade partner of Britain, and the

two economies remained intertwined. A brisk smuggling business had blossomed. The people were growing tired of paying higher prices for their goods, and a white peace seemed to be coming soon. Napoleon had bought loyalty with land, but land does not fill bellies and warm bodies unless it is tended, and the nation was still working on peopling the land it already had. The government prepared an invasion of Canada, to try and recoup some of what the war had cost. If that failed then peace was just over the horizon.

A world away, Robert Maldon agitated. He had already found allies. Near Fort Vellore, some sepoys had been angered by the change in dress uniform. It had violated the honor of the increasingly caste and honor obsessed Indian soldiers. He had convinced them that it was not in their best interests to rebel at the moment. Instead, they, and others, would wait. When the time was right, the entire country would rise up in revolution. The uniform change, which offended both Hindus and Muslims, was clearly just a prelude to more sweeping changes that would destroy the caste system entirely. Indeed, British cash reserves and manpower were being drained by the Napoleonic Wars. Was it entirely unreasonable to assume that soon Indian soldiers would be sent abroad, an act that would make them unclean? Was it so hard to believe that customs were intentionally being defiled as to lower resistance for this next act of shame? As Maldon toured the country, tensions began to rise.

Enlistment

Olgierd Mlynarczyk hummed softly to himself, breathing in the sweet autumn air. He whittled away at a block of wood. Work kept the hands busy and the soul good. He swept the knife across the wood, shaping it into complex shapes and beautiful patterns. He made the wood smooth and lacquered it. His employer, Mr. Kalischer, wanted only the best.

The recruiter was in town. His eyes flashed bright with lightning, and the buttons on his uniform sparkled. His hair was graying with experience, and his saber was heavy with the weight of lives, both of friends lost and enemies slain. Zygmunt was entranced.

"Wherever the sun shines, your Queen is with you! The whole world is touched by the omni-benevolent rays of the sun, but Corona is most blessed. God is with our people. God has always been with our people. Was the salvation of our most beloved queen not an act of God? Was her return anything short of a miracle? Our people are a blessed people. The Russians sit upon our rightful lands. They are men of ice and snow. What does the ice do when the sunlight falls upon it? It melts! So shall the strong men of Corona melt the Muscovite usurpers that now occupy the homeland! So shall the defenses of Russia melt! Napoleon himself said that one Polish hussar was stronger than ten other cavalrymen. Let us now show the world that we are stronger than one hundred men! The sun shines upon us! Praise the sun! God smiles upon us! Glory to God!"

Zygmunt Mlynarczyk signed his life over to the state, and returned home to tell his father.

"Papa, papa! The army men were in town today, and I'm going with them," said Zygmunt.

Olgierd's jaw dropped.

"What are you even saying? Have you even thought this through?"

"Of course I have! This is our chance to reclaim our home. Didn't you used to live in the occupied lands?"

"You're not going on some fool adventure for a piece of dirt."

"I've already signed the contract."

"Mr. Kalischer is a good man and very rich. He can fix that problem. You will stay here and learn how to craft."

"I'm a grown man now and I can make my own decisions. The world is calling, Papa. The fatherland is calling."

"I didn't want to tell you this, but I had a brother. He believed in the new ideas too. I still remember how he dreamed, how he whispered to the baby in his wife's belly. He went to war in the revolts, and I never saw him or his family again. Don't do this, son. Nothing good can come of it."

"No. It is our time now, papa. The colors of the world are changing now! It is a springtime for the nations!"

"Do you know what I lost to the Russians? My house and some savings, that was all. But when my brother left, I lost my family. Land is worthless, what even is land? My ancestors were millers, I am not. My ancestors lived there, and I do not. What matters is that we live our lives as best we can."

"Maybe if you had fought with him, he would've succeeded."

"I forbid it."

"Father forbids, but *Fatherland* demands it. I am going."

"You are not."

"God is with us."

"God has cursed us and I do not know why. You fail and the world will take even more from us."

"Do you see the sun shining so bright?"

"You will stay."

"It is the dawn of a new light..."

"Please. Stay."

"And the spirit of the nation that is calling us to fight!"

"What will I tell your little sister?"

"Tell her that her brother is giving her a homeland for Christmas."

His father stretched his hand out, but he was already marching away.

E5

The world drifted in and out of fog, and only the harshest light could pierce it. Even then, it lasted only a moment. The man paused at the door frame for a second, entranced by the strange light. What fae creation was this?

"Are you okay my lord?"

Ah. Yes.

"Of course Mabel. Merely checking the gas supply."

"It's Gretchen, my lord. Mother passed away twenty years ago."

Was it? So it was. He shone the lantern out and stumbled onwards. Every day the storm grew, but it would not take him yet. His mind was still his own.

He found the chess table in perfect order. Or was it? Each side was supposed to have twelve pawns with their king. But that was it, the game was in progress.

He surveyed the situation. He couldn't quite piece it together, but he was sure of something. They had both lost a great deal of material, that was certain. Ah, yes. It was the end for both of them. That much he could be certain of. He had nothing left, just a lonely king. The lord of the Southern Isles was not doing much better, with only two knights. What a curious position.

It was impossible for him to win, but his opponent couldn't checkmate him either. Nor was it guaranteed to be a stalemate. The King could beat him, but only if he cooperated. Ridiculous. He didn't even remember how it happened.

Until he did. Another beam of light peeked through the syphilitic veil shrouding his mind. The King had forced it. Out of all his twelve

pawns, he had abused one the hardest, forcing it far ahead until it was ready to promote. By that time, they had both bled everything. All the King had left was a knight. If he had chosen a Queen, his victory would be assured. He hadn't. He chose a knight. Ridiculous. Weselton would take the tie, and continue his thirty year loss-less streak. Smug in victory, he let his mind sail away.

The jungle air was thick and damp. The bugs swarmed through the air, taunting the Duke. How long ago had it been? Thirty years? Forty? Fifty? Christian was there. He had laughed about something. What was it?

"Oh trust me, the ladies love the dance. Indies women are wild about the chicken dance-or should I say, the cock dance? They worship animals you know? Savages. Sexy, sexy savages."

"Did I ever tell you were ridiculous?"

"You mean devilishly handsome and a credit to adventurers everywhere."

"Mike, you're ridiculous."

"Ridiculous? I'm a one man weasel town! And all the weasels in residence have one eye, if you catch my meaning...?"

"Mike, you're ridiculous."

"Two balls on all those weasels, my friend. You know what letter Duke starts with? The D."

Weselton swung the grappling hook around, then tossed it up onto the cliff. He gave it two quick yanks, then began to climb. The young King followed him.

"Quetzelcocktl. I'm just saying, some of these tribes have never seen the white meat before. White can't be beat, mate."

"Is that all you think about?"

"Better than your shitty dream. Oh, look at me, I'm so fancy. I'm going to be King of Denmark."

"It's the land of my ancest-"

"I can paint slightly more of the map in my color! I have ten soldiers instead of five! I'm not miniscule anymore, just tiny!"

"I get it. I still think it's better than your dream."

"Oh please, sleeping with a lot of women isn't my whole dream. I'm going to kill mythic beasts and topple sorcerer-kings. I'll find the Lost City of Gold. I'll be richer than a thousand Cathayan princes. The whole world will chant my name. No magic can stop him, no sword can slow him. I'm going to be the greatest adventurer of all time!"

"Riiight."

What was her name? He should have stayed. There were many girls there, but she was her favorite. At the time he could barely bring himself to touch her. She was fair-skinned and red-haired, right? No, that wasn't it. Skin like gleaming copper. Hair darker than the caves of Chandrapore. Eyes that burned with a feisty spark. She could've been a fighter. They could've traveled the world, seen the cloud palaces of Shangri-La and battled ancient beast-man tribes in darkest Africa.

He had been afraid. In the end, he had always been afraid. The world would have laughed at the Dukeling that married some Indian at the edge of the world. He had forgotten why he cared.

Later that night Christian was attacked. It was a bear. He had struck at the snake with his sword, but the bolt of his crossbow plinked at the snowman with no effect. It had bought time though, and Christian managed to kill the roc with his pistol. Still, it had been too close.

"What will you do if I die?" asked Christian.

"What are you going on about now?"

"If I die. It's bound to happen some day."

"You're being morbid again. We're young! We're strong! What kind of an old man fears death?"

"An old man?"

"Exactly! The kind of men who've only known regrets, who wear toupees and hide from the world. We'll never be like that. We don't need to be scared of death."

"Humor me."

"Oh fine. I guess... I guess I would try to fulfill your dream."

"I would too."

"Goodnight."

"Night."

It had been a stupid promise. Barely made any sense. How do you even make a dead man king? A dead man certainly couldn't be a famous adventurer. But they had made it. He had meant it too.

"Mabel?"

"Gretchen, my lord."

"Ah... yes. Could you repair the old steam boiler in the basement?"

"Hmm? My lord, you never could get it to do anything useful."

"Be a dear and fix it."

"As you wish, my lord. I only hope it doesn't explode and kill us all."

"Also, send King Christian a message. Tell him that I concede the match... and... and... I remember. Tell him that I remember."

"As you wish, my lord."

Weselton smiled. He and his friend would meet again soon.

Famine: Intermission

As 1807 rolled into 1808, the combined forces of Corona and France prepared to cross the Neman. With 500,000 men in the Grande Armée, 200,000 Coronan regulars, 35,000 men from the allied northern German states, and 65,000 men from the southern German states pressed into service, it was the largest force continental Europe had ever seen. With a grand total of 800,000 men, it seemed impossible that the Russian army could stand against that through any conventional means.

Napoleon had made plans to provision his troops, with 50 days of food and water traveling behind the army in 31 massive supply trains. Grand Marshal Hohenzollern, fresh from the birth of her first son, Olaf Hohenzollern, famously said that it would be a good way to burn off baby fat. Nobody on the French side could have predicted the depth of the Russian's resolve. The strategy was the brain child of Minister Michael Andreas de Tolly, and he would eventually die for it. To this day, he is remembered as a Russian folk hero. The Russian army would retreat, with cossacks riding around the countryside destroying all food as they went. Over a million Russian peasants would starve, but the Motherland itself would prevail. To this day, battles like the Battle of Vilnius and the Siege of Moscow are still appalling in the sheer amount of casualties, with the month-long Siege of Moscow itself being compared to the infamous months-long Battle of Kyoto.

At the same time, the Ottoman Empire prepared to make good on its promise to strike. The conscript army had been trained somewhat, and the Sultan hoped that valor would replace any gaps in training.

1808 would be known as the Long Year.

And I looked and saw a man on a black horse. He held a scale in his hand, and I heard him calling. Three pounds and a shilling for hardtack, ten pounds for beans. No water without victory.

Forlorn Hope

The Jerusalem of the North was burning. By week's end, half a millennium of history would be gone, scattered ashes in the wind.

The army was split into three major flanks, with cavalry scouting ahead. The Russians had planned on cavalry superiority, but they had not counted on the skill of the Polish hussars present in the Coronan army. At roughly 10:00AM on April 4th, 1808, Coronan cavalry made contact with Russian forces. There were two hours of light skirmishing, during which the commands of both armies heard about the battle. The Russian army, situated much closer, began a brisk march, while the French, which up until now had been marching at a moderate pace, began a grueling forced march up towards Vilnius. At around noon, the French cavalry commanders held a vote and decided to mount a more aggressive battle with the enemy cossacks, with the vote of Lasalle being the tie-breaker. The two cavalry units began to clash within the streets of Vilnius, and in such twisting, narrow confines, the advantage of ranged weaponry diminished. Men were hacked to bits, trampled, and speared as horsemen rode through the streets. Unfortunately, the Russian army arrived after only an hour and a half of this fighting. 220,000 Russian regulars entered the north end of the city and joined the fight. Lasalle was shot dead during the first Russian advance.

The French cavalry were whipped into a furious rage by the death of such a beloved commander, and resolved to hold the city until reinforcements arrived. Street by street they contested the town, with those who had lost their horses retreating into buildings and sniping from the windows. Charge after charge went through enemies as they attempted to move forward, and the Russians were forced back into the forested green areas of Vilnius many times that day. But it would inflict a heavy toll. The main flank arrived just as night was setting in, with the cavalry still in possession of the southern part of Vilnius. Out of the 45,000 cavalry present, 16,000 had died. 7,000 Russian horsemen had also lost their lives, along with 2,500 infantry.

The first day of the Battle of Vilnius was over, having claimed 25,500 souls.

Battle resumed as soon as dawn broke on the second day. The Russians had set up along the Neris, which ran down the center of the city. The awkward bend in the river's west, east of the modern Vingis park, was left unmanned. Instead, a line of infantry waited behind. If an enemy attempted to cross the river and flank from that crossing, then the reserves would move in and sandwich the would be attackers. The first attempt was made to cross at their main line, with snow golems spearheading the charge. However, Greek Fire melted the golems so thoroughly that they boiled into steam, cooking the hapless men behind them. Their skin turned red, blistered, and finally burst, spilling guts and fecal matter into the river. As the morning stretched on, a second probe was made at Zverynas. The crossing there was successful, but the forlorn hope was caught in Marshal Tolly's trap, and torn to bits. Still, the attack had held more promise than the last, and men began to stream across the river. At this point, the Russians unveiled their new weapon. The British had ordered 500 Nock guns produced at the beginning of the war, but their massive recoil had made them impractical for hand held use. However, with the inclusion of Elsa into the Napoleonic Armies, it soon became clear that a counter was necessary. Fire worked, but stocks of fire were limited, while the ice was theoretically infinite. The next proposed solution was to combine the tactic of incendiaries with fire being laid down on and near the Queen at all times, forcing her to keep her head down and restricting her freedom of movement. Unfortunately, the infantry firearms of the time were inadequate to the task. That being said, a new device was soon conceived. By following up on the multi-barreled design of the Nock gun, and by mounting it on cannon wheels, a larger form of the device could be deployed, with multiple triggers so that the barrels could be fired individually. This primitive machine gun was impractical against most infantry, but it would serve as the first use of modern suppressive fire, and it is credited with reducing Elsa's effectiveness for the entire rest of the Napoleonic Wars. The Russians began to pull men away from other parts of the line and deploy their reserves to deal with the

forces at Zverynas. Finally, when almost 45,000 had crossed, the entire part of the city near the crossing was set alight. Separated from their allies, the attackers were crushed. The Russian army was now in total disarray, but the Neris river was covered in fire and filled with rotting corpses. Men refused to cross the firestorm, and the moment was lost. 65,000 Russians and 50,000 French were dead, with no gains for either side.

Napoleon's reinforcements were coming close on the third day. The Russians decided to scorch the city and retreat. The French attempted pursuit, but were stymied by fire mines and barricades in their path. The fire found fuel in the many forests scattered through the city, and soon the whole city was burning. Unwilling to push through a burning city, the men stayed put. There were a few more skirmish actions around the outskirts of the city, and even a fight at Trakai Castle to the west, but for the Russians, the battle was over. Another 6000 dead on each side, mostly at Trakai, brought the total casualties of the three days to 154,500 men. According to legend, Lake Galve was haunted. If it was not before, it was now.

The battlefield was a vision of carnage. The city had been reduced to burnt-out whispering husks. The river was a slimy green, thick with putrefaction and flammable oils. Parts of it had even degraded to a thick slush of blood, intestines, and feces. Everywhere you could hear the moaning of men slowly dying, guts torn out or limbs missing. They were parched to a man, but there was not enough water. The supply trains had been unable to keep up with the forced march, something that would become a recurring theme in the campaign. Swarms of mosquitoes descended upon the city, blackening the sky with their presence. There was no food. Although the cossacks had been caught, they had done their job well, and the countryside was barren. The water was all tainted. The city sat at the joining of the Vilnia and Neris river, but both had been rendered undrinkable. Those who dared risk it soon caught dysentery and died dehydrated and wallowing in their own filth. Dogs, abandoned by frightened owners fleeing the city, ran rampant, nipping at the still writhing bodies of wounded men. The rot had condensed into a

miasmatic fume that now hung over the city, a fog made of disease and the stench of death. Burnt gnarled hands had replaced the forests of Vilnius. The medicine was in the back, and even if it wasn't, there was not enough food and water to nurse the injured back to health. Many would choose a quick mercy killing if they could get one, but the dying were too numerous for the living to cull. The soldiers were dirty and covered in sweat, but there was no bathing. Only a fool would consider the water clean. Without the ability to clean themselves, lice began to infest the men. With lice came typhoid. More men would die of Typhoid than of any other cause. To this day, three days in Vilnius is used in German to denote a profoundly unpleasant experience. The Jerusalem of the North had become a hell on earth.

Nor was the battle over.

Fracture

The Battle of Vilnius had far-reaching implications. Most relevant was the death of Field Marshal Tolly. During the battle, a spark had spread onto his command tent, which collapsed in on him, burning him alive. He was swiftly replaced by the skilled General Kutuzov. With the losses taken by French cavalry, the Cossacks could now continue the original strategy unhindered. The battle had removed Napoleon's reputation for invincibility. No longer was he unstoppable. Napoleon had rushed into the battle hoping for a decisive battle to end the war quickly. His hopes went up in smoke as the city did. The heavy losses taken by the Russians meant they would enter a full retreat back to St. Petersburg, burning everything as they went. There they could link up with naval reinforcements and form a larger force. No matter what he did, Napoleon would suffer. If he retreated from Russia, it would mean admitting defeat. If that happened, all of Europe would regain its courage and he would be swamped. If he marched slowly, he could keep up with his supplies and keep his army fresh, but there was insufficient forage, and his wagons would soon be depleted. Thus Napoleon decided to force a march all the way to St. Petersburg. If he was successful there, he would still have his decisive victory, and he would still be able to force his enemies to sue for peace.

There was discontent in the camp. Elsa wanted nothing more than to curl up and sleep forever. The last few days had been rough. When she was fighting, people were shooting at her or around her, or trying to set her on fire, and when she wasn't, she was making blocks of ice to stick in thirsty mouths. The acrid smell of smoke wafted to her nose, but she ignored it. The scent had been commonplace during the battle. Then she heard horses and men screaming. Again, all too normal. Then came the clanging of steel and steel, very close to her tent, and she began to worry. Then a cannonball went soaring through the top of her tent and she shot straight out of bed. The battery had only been gauging the range.

"Elsa, what are you doing? It's not safe out here!" shouted Anna.

The next shot was a real one. A spray of canister shot riddled one of the soldiers with holes, and he collapsed into a bloody heap. The camp was in chaos, the air ringing with the din of melee.

"Get to cover! Heads down!" ordered the Grand Marshal.

Elsa created an ice shield out of thin air, and the next canister embedded its payload into, pincushioning the wall.

"What's the situation?" asked Elsa.

"Some sort of mutiny's happening!" replied Anna.

"So who do we shoot?"

"Anyone shooting at us!"

With that, Anna wheeled around and put a bullet between the eyes of a rifleman. She spun the pistol in her hand and blew away the smoke.

"Can you push that ice shield forward quickly?"

"I think so, why?"

"Men, affix bayonets and follow the shield. We're charging the hill!"

The ice shield took off, the soldiers following close behind. The cannoneers leaped to the side as the wall of ice smashed apart, only to be confronted with angry troops. One of them gasped as Anna ran him through with a bayonet. Another tried to save his friend, but a swift kick to the groin stopped that, and a quick decapitation stopped that for good. One tried to grapple the Marshal, but she bit his arm and he howled in pain, before a rifle butt to head smashed in his skull. The gun was secure.

"Elsa, see any rebels?"

"How do I tell who the rebels are?"

"Look for anyone fighting our loyal officers!"

"I don't know any of the officers! I never leave my tent!"

"I'll take care of it. Rotate the gun 60 degrees CCW, you see those men fighting Fabrefond? What shot do we have?"

A soldier rummaged through the ammunition nearby.

"No more canister or grape, sir, only regular and chain," he said.

"Damn it all, give them whiff of chain," replied the Grand Marshal.

The soldier retrieved the chain shot and the team made ready.

"One!" shouted Anna.

The gun was leveled at the rebel scum.

"Two!"

One of the men cleaned the barrel with a sponge, wiping away powder and other residues.

"Three!"

The gun was loaded with the chain shot and powder.

"Four!"

The spongeman rammed the shot down while the fourth gunner prevented a flame. Then, the number four man pricked a hole in the powder bag.

"FIVE! Fire!"

The match was lit, and the gun made its report. The chain hurtled out. Normally, it would be used to destroy ships, wrapping and cutting through masts and sails. It weaved a savage path through the air, cleaving and snarling at the sky. It tumbled down to earth, bounced, and nipped at the nearest foe. It seized around his arm, tearing it off and reducing it to shreds before bounding cheerfully into the next enemy, who was sliced in half.

"One! Two! Three! Four! FIVE! FIRE!"

On and on it went, each blast of the cannon bringing death to another few. One, two, three, four, five, fire! One, two, three, four, five, fire! Like the beating of a drum or the beating of a heart, it was regular, clean, and methodical. It tapped out a rhythm and asked only that the soldiers dance to its tune. One by one, the clusters of rebels were cut down. Finally, the last group of mutineers threw down their guns and surrendered. The camp grew silent. 12,000 were dead or dying, and 24,000 would be too wounded to fight on. Anna stopped, sighed, and pulled out a canteen of vodka.

"How are you so nonchalant about this?"

Anna put her arm around Elsa's shoulder.

"It's easy sis. All my life has been a series of doors in my face!"

"Are you going to sing?"

"And then suddenly I bump into..."

"... You?"

"Gunpowder. Gunpowder blows up doors."

"Are you going to get engaged to your gun now?"

"Don't be silly Elsa, I'm already married. Do you remember when you went all icy and froze the palace? Everyone thought you were crazy except me. I believed in you. Everyone thought that Italy would be a

bunch of city states forever, but now Napoleon's king. Everyone thought that Corona would never get an heir, but then Rapunzel showed up out of nowhere. The world can send all the shitty stuff it has at you, and you can either smile about it or get sad and give up. Something's going to break sooner or later, and it's not going to be this smile."

"But..."

"I know what you're going to say, and lots of other things will break. Based on personal testing, this includes spines, faces, hearts, skulls, arms, fingers, legs, feet, horses, pelvises, and kidneys."

"That's not what I was going to say at all."

"So maybe I'm not so good at the finishing sentences door. I'll just keep smiling and sooner or later that door will blow up too."

"I think I understand."

"Of course you do! You're my smart, beautiful sister and I love you and you can do no wrong except for when you leave the toilet seat up."

"Why would I leave the toilet seat up?"

"I... umm... hmm... Sven lied to me, huh?"

"Reindeers can't talk."

"Then we have a mystery on our hands."

"Anna, you're the best sister a girl could have. I love you too."

Forced March

Tengri is the religion of the wide blue sky, but if an observer looked up right then, he'd conclude that there was no god. Of course, the Mongols and their religion were long gone from Russia by that point. The ground was a thick mud, the kind that sucks away at your boots and makes every step a chore. Some of the wagons were getting trapped in it and breaking down. There had been unseasonably heavy rains, and the air was heavy and humid. The rains kept the bugs away, but it was a false mercy. After every rain they came back in even larger swarms.

Typhus was spreading through the camp like wildfire. The bright rash was a marker for death, and soldiers would make every attempt to avoid those they knew had it. It didn't help. The camp was woefully unhygienic. The disease-carrying lice had found a near heaven on Earth. The water being carried by the caravans was far too precious to use on showers or laundry, so instead the army relied on ice water generated by Elsa's magic. But the work was tedious and endless. There was no room for creativity there, only the generation of precisely sized ice blocks. If you washed, it was with cold water only, and only after your turn had come. What's worse, every day Elsa became more and more exhausted. The ice was not forming as easily here. Her powers were fading, almost as weak as they had been when she was a child. The supplementary ice water slowly dwindled to a trickle, then stopped. Lice, mice, and flies followed the army along, feeding on detritus, the dead, and the despondent. The army was rich in carrion.

The dry days were hardly any better. The endless rise and fall of boots on grass or road pounded the dirt hard, killed all the vegetation, and kicked up massive clouds of dust. With so many men, the dirt clouds were closer to storms, and they stung the eyes bitterly and burned the lungs. The fields they passed by were painted a dismal gray, and the troops hardly fared better. The supply trains, much slower, had trouble keeping up, and many days were at half

rations or worse. Some men of weaker constitution would simply drop dead. According to the Coronan field manual, under ideal conditions, with no baggage, perfect columns, and clear roads, one could march for twenty some odd miles at a pace of three miles per hour. These conditions were hardly ideal. Columns ran into each other, orders were confused, and the sky itself seemed to weigh down on the army. On particularly muddled days, the men counted their blessings if they could manage eight miles. Every bit added to the army made the task of organization ever more complex. Horses had to be fed as well, and wagons, horses, and men all moved at different rates. Eight mile days were exceptional. Many days were closer to two or three.

The pace was not helping. The more the men marched, the more their footwear wore away. Boots wore apart and ground away. Strips were torn off uniforms and wrapped around feet to just to give a little bit of protection. Mud caked legs and hardened. Feet were cut up, bruised, and run raw. Napoleon would not slow the march. He had to cut the Russians off and win a decisive victory or be swallowed up. There was no forage here, only empty farmhouses and burnt out fields. There was no rest, only a grueling endless march.

They slogged forward. Morale had suffered. Zygmunt and others knew that the 25,000 rebels had been south Germans forced into service. But how much of a real difference was there between south German and north German? It was perhaps not the sanest line of reasoning. Eating boiled shoe leather will do that to your mind.

Packs hung heavily on shoulders. They were loaded with the necessities. Ammunition, a bit of water, something for sleep, powder, tools. This was no leisurely walk around the city.

The final day saw one of the great feats of speed in history. The entire army was pushed forward at a vigorous rate and covered the last 27 miles in a single day. It was all for naught.

Wind whistled through empty buildings and down lonely streets. Rags shambled about, held by invisible hands. Napoleon was

dumbfounded. There was no Russian army, not even a delegation of Russian diplomats. The city had been completely abandoned. Not even a mouse stirred there, for they had all starved. It had taken 82 days and 400,000 lives to reach St. Petersburg. Napoleon had conquered a city of ghosts.

Family Trip

The gray clouds and gray buildings and gray people and gray pollution stretched out into the gray horizon. Point is, it was gray. The gray streets were lined with gray rows of identical gray concrete apartments.

"Kids, welcome to Warsaw, Corona. This is the land of your ancestors," said the proud father.

"Hey dad? Our ancestral homeland is kind of a load of garbage," replied his son.

"It's sort of like hot gym socks and cat hair," said his daughter.

His son idly discarded a gum wrapper and the father ordnunged internally. His daughter pointed to a gleaming white tower breaking up the gray distance.

"What's that?"

"Oh. That's... that's... ummm... that's Stalin's dick."

"Stalin has a huge dick," said the boy.

"I want to touch Stalin's dick," said the girl.

"Irene Maria Aslaugssen, I forbid you to say that sentence or any variation on it ever again. But we can go see the building," said Riley in a stern voice.

The bus stop was crowded, mostly with disheveled blank-eyed office workers, with the occasional hobo sprinkled in. It smelled like dried piss, warm used tampons, and dead dreams. The bus pulled in, and Riley herded his children on board, paying the driver the appropriate amount of euros. It sputtered and fumed, then slowly chugged away from the curb. His children took the seats, while he held on to a pole.

After about five minutes, the bus stopped in front of Stalin's dick and the family got off. It was getting harder and harder to control his children, what with the teenage rebellion, but Riley managed. It was far, far better than giving them an absentee father.

The building was ringed by four statues. The bus had dropped them off in front of a twenty-foot tall statue of Kaiserin Rapunzel.

"Is that the Queen you wrote a book about?" asked Irene.

"Yes, that's Kaiserin Rapunzel, first Empress of the Coronan Federation."

"They put her in front of Stalin's dick? Hmmm. Suspiciously lewd," said his son Dave.

"I'm certain that wasn't the implication, and you are too."

"Yeah, yeah."

"She's very pretty, dad," said his daughter.

"Yes, she is. Far-sighted too. She and one of her advisers, Dr. Humboldt, were early proponents of electric telegraphy. Think of that next time you pull out that iPhone!"

"Is there anything more about her?" asked his daughter.

"Yes, plenty. There's even a legend that she will return on a beam of sunlight one day, when Corona is suffering from its direst need, and revive all of the worthy dead."

"Who's that over there?" asked his son.

It was a bronze statue of a man sitting in thought. His hand caressed his beard knowingly, and his eyes, pensive and calm, stared out into the distance. There was a half-finished wheel cradled in his lap, and in his other hand he held a spoke.

"Ah. That's the Wheelwright, legendary founder of the Piast dynasty."

"What did he do?"

"Well, he was a poor craftsman who still managed to feed two strangers turned away by the duke, and for his hospitality, his line would become kings of Poland. It teaches a lesson about always being kind and helping others."

"Aren't strangers dangerous?"

"Yes, sometimes, and you should be careful. But that doesn't mean you can't be kind too. Friends were strangers too once."

"Cool. What about those horse guys?"

"That's Jogaila and Vytautas, two great commanders and rulers. They fought together and drove back the Teutonic Knights."

"I see. Christianity ruining things onnnnnceeee again."

"Not so fast. The Polish were Christian too, and they would eventually Christianize Lithuania. This statue is more of a symbol of friendship, and the kind of things that can be accomplished when you work together. The Teutonic Knights were carving out their own little kingdom, and fighting anyone that got in their way. Nobody believed in the ragtag coalition, but they won and changed the destiny of Eastern Europe."

Riley herded his children around the building to the last statue, a modest and simple block sitting on the southern side of Stalin's dick. On it were names, with one of them being scratched and partially graffitied.

"And this... this is the monument to Operation Valkyrie."

"Huh?"

"During the Second World War, many of the officers and officials grew disgusted with the monstrosities of the Reich. They hatched a conspiracy to assassinate the Fuhrer, and succeeded, but it led to a civil war against a rival faction led by two propaganda ministers, Hitler and Goebbels. Eventually they won and restored the monarchy, but not all of them made it. Those names are written here."

"Why is one of the names so scratchy?"

"Oh... yes, I see. That would be... Hauptsturmfuhrer Anna Elizabeth Hohenzollern. I can understand why. She was an agent for the conspirators working in the Waffen SS, feeding back information. However, in order to keep her cover, she had to hide her true feelings and make sure things stayed efficient and non-suspicious. Many innocent people died because of her. She ran one of the camps."

"So is she a good guy or a bad guy?" asked Irene.

"Neither. Both. History doesn't always have good guys and bad guys. She... she did many horrible things. But she also helped save Corona from itself. The conspiracy would have certainly failed without her work. Hmmm... I want you to remember what I'm about to tell you. You're going to listen to me less and less in the coming years. You're going to hate the Man, and everything he stands for. But the Man doesn't hurt you because he likes to. He does things because they have to happen. The Man hates the unfairness of it too. In fact, there's no such thing as The Man, only a bunch of little men trying to get by with their lives. Normal people, just like us. When you get even older than that, you might hate yourself or hate the system. No matter what, though, I don't ever want you two to give up on your dreams. Dreams can come true. Just... just remember that, ok?"

Four Hundred Miles

"War is hell. Russian winter is worse." - Anonymous

It was a placid mid-July day. Slightly over three months had passed since the campaign had begun.

"Happy 27th birthday. I got you something," said Anna.

It was a set of bowls and cups. It appeared as if gold leaf was laid over a black coating, but they were surprisingly light and airy. They were covered in a floral pattern.

"Found these in Veliky Novgorod. Kinda cool. How do they think they do that?" said Anna.

"They're wonderful, I really appreciate it."

"Also, we're back on full rations. The wagons have finally caught up and we've got less mouths to feed. It's not a real birthday dinner, but it's sort of special since we've been living on gruel so long."

"Oh... oh no. I forgot your birthday. What kind of a sister am I?"

"Don't sweat it. I went out with Kristoff and the marines, and they paid for all of my drinks. Did you know I was born on the same day they won their independence? Crazy stuff, cra-zee stuff. Almost like I was born to do this."

"I'll make it up to you next year, I promise."

"Don't sweat it. We've got a full day ahead of us, let's get moving."

The army had slowed to a normal pace. At that rate, it would be three and a half months more. Winter was coming.

Three hundred and fifty more miles to Moscow.

Four hundred more miles to Corona.

The Ottoman troops had been delayed a bit. The Serbian provinces had been in open revolt for the past few years, brazenly declaring their own independence. All but a few major garrisons had fallen to the rebels, and they had even established their own system of governance. Alas, it was not to be. 200,000 Ottoman soldiers, bolstered with 10,000 crack Austrian troops assaulted the defenses in Belgrade, and the rebels were publicly executed. 300 men found especially responsible had meat hooks driven through their abdomens. They were left to dangle above the Belgrade gates as they slowly died of exposure. Karadorde Petrovic, one of the leaders of the insurgency, fled into exile in Morocco. The Turkish army pillaged the city for a week then proceeded towards Vienna.

They had been there before, hundreds of years prior. The summer of 1529 had been very wet, and Suleiman the Magnificent's artillery had been caught in the mud. Without his cannon, Suleiman was unable to take the city, and so ended the great Ottoman conquests. Christendom had been saved. The situation was different now. The Turkish army had plenty of cannon now, but it wasn't needed. The gates of Vienna swung open, unbidden. The liberation of Germany had begun.

The Ottoman forces would not be divided. Instead, they would sweep over the German lands as one, an unstoppable force. If they were left to spread out, there was a very real risk of the remaining Coronan forces destroying them one by one. There were only 30,000 defending the region, but most of them were Kingdom Guards, an elite force of dragoons usually tasked with guarding the capital. The Kingdom Guards had been trained to ride vast distances, hold against overwhelming odds, and fire at a blisteringly quick rate of 6 shots per minute. There was a very real risk that the green recruits of the Ottoman army would break and run before the Kingdom Guards did. The main advantage of the Ottoman army was numbers, and it had to be preserved.

Father

Father. It was a disgusting word. Even thinking it made his mouth feel slimy. He cleared his throat.

"Britons! Proud, brave Britons! Today, you bring proper English liberty to a debased people! For centuries, these islands have been in the thrall of decadent and corrupt nobles. Today, that ends! There is no darkness strong enough to withstand the coming of the light. There is no night that does not end with the dawn. The British army may be afraid, but you, you are brave. You are the righteous few who are willing to sally forth onto a continent despoiled. Today is the day that Napoleon's empire of evil falls!"

They cheered. Idiots, all of them. He had made that speech up on the spot. That was the real difference between nobility and the plebeians. You could give the common man anything and he would obey. Mindless drones and sheep. He knew better than them. It wasn't a judgment so much as it was a fact of life. He paused. It wasn't quite right to think of himself as a he anymore, was it? He was much better now. He was royal.

We know better. Truer than any of the garbage coming out of mouths these days.

The guns of the defenses weren't firing. It was odd. His men were streaming onto the beaches, but there wasn't a single enemy combatants to be found. It was a clearly a trap, but if it was for his army, it would be sprung by now. He was the obvious target.

Still, he couldn't very well stay back now. The men would think him a coward. It was a devious mind he was against. He stepped off the boat and onto the sand of the Southern Isles. Still nothing. Birds chirped carelessly in the distance.

Ahead of him was Christiansborg Palace, his childhood home. The two arms of the palace rested smugly on the earth, the great eye of the tower judging him as he neared. It didn't matter anymore, it would soon be its master.

The door swung open with the lightest of touches. There were no barricades. The lonely halls were completely devoid of people. Hans scowled. There would be ambushers here.

He took a step forward. No shots fired. He took another step. Nothing. He took up a brisk pace and began to walk towards the royal bedroom. The only sound was the mocking of his boots echoing back at him.

Door after door opened. Nothing. Finally, he came to the last corridor before his father. There were two chess tables set up there. One had a single king circled by twelve pawns. The other, two kings, white and black, and two knights, both white. Was there any point to such a ridiculous display? Hans spun around, scanned the perimeter, checked the ceiling. It could've been a distraction to allow an assassin to close in, but there was no one. A lesser man would have called this paranoia. We knew better.

He opened the final door. Inside was a middle-aged man and his father.

"So you must be the one prolonging my father's agony? I thank you for your devoted and ceaseless service to the crown. You are dismissed," said Hans, honey practically dripping from his tongue.

The man stared at him like a scared deer.

"Go on now. Help the people, pursue a private practice. I have to have a heart-to-heart discussion with my father. The door is right there, my good man."

The doctor nodded then ran out. Hans slammed the door behind him and barred him. He was alone with his father now. First him, then

Arendelle, or Corona, or Sweden. It didn't really matter where, the world would be his.

His father looked at him through beady, sallow eyes. They were dark and set deeply in his rotten skull. His hair was thin, gray, and wiry. Blood and mucus speckled his beard, which draped across his torso like a burial shroud. His skin was stretched taut over his bones, almost translucently pale. The room smelled of decay. His hands were splayed out, nails long and splintered. His lips were cracked and bleeding, his gums blood red and receded.

"Daddy, I'm hooooome. Did you miss me? Of course you did. I'm the only one of your sons that was anything more than an abject failure. How does it feel? Wonderful? Grand? Splendid? All three, all three. It must be great having a son like me, hmm? Look at the others, idiots all. Especially your heir. How does it feel knowing that perfect, lovable Eric is a simpleton who married a mute he just met? It must be absolutely delightful. I'll help you drink in the joy."

His father only smiled at him. Hans narrowed his eyes and drew his cane.

"A good host... should always try to keep his guests entertained. Where are your stories, father? What about all those amusing anecdotes you used to share? I'll... encourage you to speak up. Shyness is a curse, I remember."

Hans gave his father a sharp smack in the face using his cane.

"Better? I'm sure it is. Now then, how do you feel? How do you feel that little Hans was the only one to understand the game of thrones? How do you feel knowing that everyone else was worthless, subhuman garbage? Well? Answer me."

His father looked him straight in the eye.

"Son... I win. Checkmate," said his father. Then the old man gave a hacking, wet laugh and closed his eyes.

"What? What on earth does that mean? Answer me!"

Hans began to beat the body, striking the face again and again. He threw himself at the man, driving his whole mass into every blow.

"Explain yourself! COME ON! ANSWER ME! For once in your miserable husk of an existence, ANSWER ME! YOU SON OF A BITCH! I AM YOUR KING NOW! FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE, GIVE ME AN ANSWER!"

So began the reign of Hans I, King of the Southern Isles. The King is dead. Long live the King.

Fusillier

It was another overcast day in a long series of overcast days. When had he last seen the sun? Mid-April? It seemed like an eternity ago.

The snows had already started, despite it only being late August. He didn't shiver, though. There wasn't a point to it. The boots went on ahead of him, the boots went on behind. Everywhere, a sea of boots going up and down again. The rhythm of the boots conducted him. It told him to march. He did.

His thoughts swam about in a messy stew. A series of starts and stops and starts again. A million lines that didn't quite connect. He tried to focus. It didn't work.

It was another overcast day in a long series of overcast days. When had he last seen the sun? He remembered the smell of sawdust and autumn leaves falling. That seemed about right.

He forced himself to wake up, only to find himself already awake. Good, the job was already done. Less work. He was already in the middle of a march, apparently. They had to be going somewhere important. That was good. Doing important things was good. He took a swig from his canteen, but it was completely dry. There was supposed to be water in there. How odd.

It was another overcast day in a long series of overcast days. When had he last seen the sun? Had he ever seen the sun?

His body was getting weaker and weaker and he didn't know why. There was really no reason for such a silly thing, but every week sapped away his strength. They had even gone back on full rations, but the problem didn't go away. Things were getting better though. He was very, very warm now. It was comfortable. It was even better than the sun.

It was another overcast day in a long series of overcast days. When had he last seen the sun? He remembered her face, so squishy and puffy and innocent. How she cried when he hid his face and giggled when he moved his head back. The way she was endlessly curious, how she tried to eat everything.

He stared out across the plains. His feet continued to plod up and down, independent of his will. It was a slog. His coat was so, so heavy. It was making it hard to march. He didn't need a coat anyways, it was warm enough. He took it enough and continued the march.

It was another overcast day in a long series of overcast days. When had he last seen the sun? It had been such a happy day, hadn't it? The sun addressed them all in her boundless graceful and kind voice. She was the mother of the nation, the great guardian of all the people. He had basked in her radiance. She was marching in the column too, he could see her.

He sped up, disobeying the orders of the drum and metronome. He had to see the sun again. He got a closer look. It was not the sun, just her family. Protect them always. He gathered all of his remaining rations into a pack, wrapped them up with his shirt. He ran over, shoved the package into the blonde's hands, saluted the redhead. She was reaching for a weapon. How strange.

"Will I ever see the sun again?"

The words had slipped from his mouth, but were they his? He didn't know. The redhead was putting the sword away again. Still strange. Had he fallen? So he had.

The feel of snow against his face was so nice. The whole world went white.

Zygmunt has died.

Would you like to write an epitaph? Y

What would you like on the tombstone? Praise the Sun!

Would you like to make any changes? N

All of the people in your party have died.

Press SPACE to continue.

You have failed to complete the Moscow Trail.

Press R to restart.

Footsteps in the Sand

The sands were hot under his feet. The leather of his shoes might be melting. He wasn't quite sure. The rock he was hiding behind was burning up, but it was better than being shot at out in the open. A few shots whizzed above his head. Another slammed into the rock, chipping a few pieces away. He coughed. The bullets were kicking up the sand. The September sun blazed overhead.

It was supposed to have been easy. 10,000 Moroccan troops would cross the border and put down the disorganized Barbary states. With the Ottoman empire distracted, there would be no reinforcements. Resistance had been heavier than anticipated, and the Moroccan soldiers had been bogged down.

He reached for a cigar. A peculiar time to smoke, but a habit was a habit. Besides, if he was going to die, he might as well die happy. The aroma swelled up in his lungs, and carried him away. The sound of gunfire evened out into a relaxing lullaby. He smirked. They could say that he died with class on his tombstone.

He puffed a few smoke circles through his nose, then tossed the cigar butt aside. It was oddly peaceful. He considered springing the hundred yards to the sea. It might be nice to take a swim before he met his maker. He peeked over the rock. The enemy was still there, slowly advancing. Then he took a double take. Cresting over the dune was a strange flag. Then it hit him.

"Thalatta! Thalatta!"

"Hell in a handbasket boys, we've done it!"

It was the Stars and Stripes. The men crossed over the ridge and he took a closer look. A more ragtag band it would be hard to find. Some men were wearing German clothes, some Turkish. Some were wearing ragged US uniforms. He could see fezs and loose pants,

Bedouin robes, even lederhosen. Aside from the Americans, there were Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs, Greeks, Armenians, Egyptians, Italians, Austrians, Germans, and even a Chinaman. There were horsemen, and riflemen, and men with standard muskets.

A few of them assembled into a line on the ridge, and the rest charged, horses and men all. It was a chaotic thing, boisterous and loud. The pirates looked, then immediately broke and fled. The leader then ran over to his little rock.

The US officer stretched his hand out, and he shook it.

"Sergeant Oscar C. Rates, United States Marines, happy as a hatter to meet you! Never thought the goshdarned Tripoli shore could be so beautiful!"

He was a loss for words. He scrounged his brains to find the appropriate way to say it, keeping in mind the limitations of his own English.

"Where in hell did you come from?"

"It's a long story, and you wouldn't believe me if I told ya. I'd be pleased as peach to tell you, though, just as soon as we find a base around here."

He nodded. Allah was merciful indeed.

Frozen Wastes

The enemy made contact about thirty miles from Moscow. The supply lines of the Grande Armée stretched out for miles, and were dangerously vulnerable at points. Fighting began on October 5th, 1808, the first official day of the siege of Moscow. Russian cossacks attempted to raid French supplies, and would have succeeded if not for the quick action of General de Caulaincourt. His Dragoons rode to the defense of the wagons, circling them and mounting a defense against the enemy cavalry. So began the phase of the battle known as the Seven Days' Skirmish. Skirmish lines were thrown out and cavalry formed a defensive screen as the army marched onto Moscow. About one thousand were killed or seriously wounded on both sides over the course of those seven days.

The Russian army had swollen in size. At Vilnius they had 200,000 regulars against the roughly 250,000 soldiers of Napoleon's center column. As the Russians had retreated, many of the peasants, faced with starvation, asked to join. By the time Napoleon reached Moscow, these civilian militia forces had ballooned to more than 800,000 in number, as the people of Russia rallied to fight a great patriotic war against the invaders. Unfortunately, as the Russians knew, and as Napoleon had learned, there was no way to field so many men in one place at one time.

With the French army drawing ever closer to Moscow, Tsar Alexander issued his famous orders. Two Romes had fallen. Moscow was the third-and it must not fall. There would be no more giving of ground. The Russian soldiers, demoralized by having to burn their own homes and fields, rejoiced. There would be no more retreat and no surrender. This was ground to hold or die fighting for.

The first line of defense was near the village of Borodino. The Russian forces had built a series of earthworks between the Moskva and Kolocha rivers. 200,000 Russians, mostly militia, had been assembled to hold the line against the remaining 250,000 men of the

French army. The Russian artillery had been deployed heavily to the right. This would prove to be a fatal mistake. The left position was by far the weakest, and Napoleon set out to destroy it. He committed one hundred cannon to bombard the left positions, then sent in a first, unsuccessful assault. When the first attack failed, Napoleon relocated another two hundred cannon to the left and continued bombardment. Time was of the essence, and another unsuccessful attack might bog down the entire assault. Thus, a full 50,000 men were brought to the left and sent forward in an overwhelming advance. With a literal wall of men falling upon them, the untrained militia broke and ran, abandoning the defenses. They would be cut down in the rout. Momentum behind them, they continued to press down the Russian line, bringing them to the Great Redoubt on the Russian right. However, the defenses there were nigh-impenetrable, and for three hours the forces clashed indecisively, with French forces streaming in to reinforce the attack. Many of his surviving officers would be shot dead in the assault.

Napoleon was wary to commit his Imperial Guard, the best and strongest of the Grande Armée, despite the imploring of all of his generals. However, two hours into the attack, one of the Old Guard walked brazenly into the generals' meeting. The fighting had clearly stalemated, and the grizzled old grenadier was mad. One of the privileges of the Old Guard was the right to complain, and the man would give Napoleon one of the most severe tongue lashings he would ever receive. The men of the Old Guard were all experienced veterans, many of whom had served Napoleon for almost twenty years. But what use was that bravery if it was never used? What good was a soldier that did not fight? Were the men of the Old Guard selected to enter a retirement? Napoleon relented. Les Grognards were committed.

The presence of the Old Guard stirred the spirits of the men, and the ferocity of the aged troops was something to behold. They stormed the fortifications with no fear of death, and the rain of enemy gunfire all around was no deterrent. Not even literal fire could stop them, for they moved too fast for the heat to catch up. Battles were decided by

bayonet as well as by bullet, and that day, the bayonet won. The Great Redoubt fell, and the first line of defense was gone. With it came the capture of 400 pieces of artillery, as most of it could not be retreated with the collapse of the defenses.

Kutuzov was shocked and appalled. He harbored a great love for his soldiers, and feared for their safety. The Tsar had tied his hands. If Kutuzov would not make the sacrifices needed to defend Moscow, someone else would-and Kutuzov would pay the price. Still, it was a deeply scarring thing.

50,000 Russians and 20,000 French had died or were wounded at the first redoubt, with the remainder of the Russians falling back to ridge laying behind the battle. However, the militia became confused when they saw the retreat of the first line, and this soon led to a great drop in morale. When the French came marching, the militia chose to abandon the ridge, and with it, their own safety. Without protection, they too would be run down. The second line had been manned by 50,000, and of those, 20,000 would become casualties of the battle that wasn't. Moscow was now within Napoleon's grasp.

200,000 Russians were guarding the city, along with the 180,000 that retreated from Borodino. For three days, Napoleon's men would sally into the city, and each day they would be pushed back by the sheer volume of men fielded. Fire, which had proven so crucial in previous battles, was failing here, as the Russians were unwilling to destroy their own capital. Moscow had to hold. It was the Third Rome, and there could be no more after. Over the course of those three days, another 45,000 French and 120,000 Russians would die. At the evening of the third day, Napoleon decided to halt the assaults, as he would soon have no army at all. It was decided to use the 1200 cannon to wear down the enemy's resolve. The supplies on hand would have to do. This would've been the end of the matter, if not for one thing.

On the dawn of the 29th day of battle, and the 21st of the siege proper, the plan was interrupted by some of the most devastating and unusual weather ever seen in a military campaign.

Frozen Heart

Elsa was acutely aware that she was dreaming. It was an odd sensation, made odder by the fact that she seemed to have no control whatsoever over the dream. The void stretched out in inky blackness all around her. No amount of focus could summon anything from the emptiness. She sighed. It was still better than the nightmares, but she hadn't had those in more than a year. Then she heard a noise, and turned around. Behind her was some sort of viking warrior, and he was in mid-swi...

The world swam back into vision. Again, the void. She had pressed her luck too hard by presuming that it wasn't a nightmare. Elsa went on guard, scanning the horizon. She tried to move through the void, if that could be called movement, and she tried to do so unpredictably. It didn't work. Two figures appeared out of the corner of her eye, and again came the ax.

Well, at least she had a little more time to collect her thoug...

There were three that time. When she looked back again, there were now four. Thunk.

Five. Smack.

She immediately jumped away this time, and saw six men coming for her. Then she noticed something familiar about the sixth. That was one of the ancient Russian...

Tsars. And then there were seven. She broke into a full sprint. Maybe this would work.

It didn't. Eight.

Well, maybe her ice powers would...

Nine. Would be gone, like they had been for the last few months. She really couldn't catch a...

Broken head. Ten.

There was no escaping even. Eleven. When she. Twelve. Got. Thirteen. Back. Fourteen. Up. It. Fifteen. Was. Sixteen. Ridiculous. Seventeen. They multiplied, more and more of them, an unending flurry of blows.

Then, it stopped. One figure began to stride towards her from within the darkness. As it neared, Elsa made out his face. It was Alexander I. The Tsar brought his cloak around her, and she was again submerged in darkness.

When she emerged, there was only the first man again. He walked up and whispered in her ear.

"Rurik lives."

Then came a blow that stung her to her very bones. Her eyes shot open. She was still being hit, what was going on? A golf-ball sized hailstone beamed her between the eyes. She reached to the side and donned her helmet, then ran out of the tent. It was hailing everywhere.

"Storm the defenses men! We need to take shelter!"

Tents were being bashed to bits and wagons were being dented. Men were running forward as fast as they could, and the gates of Moscow were burning. Ladders were propped up against walls, barricades, and buildings, and men were scrabbling up as fast as they could. Maybe this would be a good experience. Did she really need ice powers to be a good soldier? After all, she was classically educated, physically fit, excellent at analysis, particularly mathematical analysis, and well-versed in the ancient histories of conquerors as august as Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. It couldn't be that hard to.

She woke up again. Anna's smiling face was waiting for her.

"Hey Anna. I had the strangest dream last night. Did anything bad happen?"

"Nope, not at all! But don't look down."

Elsa looked down. Her hands were manacled.

"Does being a prisoner of war count as something bad?" asked Anna.

"Yeah. Yeah it does."

"Oh. Does a forty-eight hour hailstorm count as something bad?"

"I think that does too."

"Okay then. I just won't tell you about those two things. Everything is going great!"

After a bit of questioning, Elsa learned that the hailstorm had forced Napoleon's army to seek sturdier shelter, causing them to launch a direct attack on Moscow. For two days, the armies had clashed underneath the hail, but one crucial push by the Russians had caused the complete collapse of the right flank, and in the disarray, the army had gotten split apart. 15,000 had fallen, and a full 120,000 of the 170,000 men Napoleon had left were captured in the chaos. Napoleon was gone, sent fleeing back through Russia. God only knew how many of his men could survive the march back.

Frozen Bank Account

The messenger came sprinting into the great hall, breath barely keeping up with his body.

"Your Highness, our army has been crushed at Moscow and has shattered."

The Queen instinctively reached backwards to grab the healing hair she no longer had.

"I... I... I see. Is that all?" asked Rapunzel.

"No. The Tsar has your cousins, your Highness. He is demanding a ransom of 650 million rubles."

"650 million? Silver or assignat?"

"Silver rubles. What's more, he wants you to send the highest ranking official you can."

"Oh no, oh no. This is bad. We don't have 650 million rubles. We're going to have to sell something... I know. Eugene, come with me. We're going to need to call a broker."

They passed through the labyrinthine halls of the palace, before finally coming to a massive steel door. Rapunzel set several combinations, then cranked a wheel. The door creaked open. The inside of the vault was lit by several gas lamps, which slowly flickered to life. The pair paused. The vault was completely sealed, and it would be good to cycle out some of the stale air. Then Rapunzel stepped inside, Eugene following close behind.

"Well... looks like somebody's beefed up the security here. No more heists for me," said the King.

Rapunzel ignored the comment, walking to the center of the room. The Polish crown jewels shimmered, lying in wait. The Crown of Boleslaw, which had been used as one of the crowns in her coronation. The Queen's Crown, which had been used during the ceremony for Eugene. He hadn't been happy about that. The Hungarian crown. The Homagial crown. The Funebralis crown. Szczerbiec, the Sword of Poland. Scepters, orbs, jewels. Her eyes were drawn to a familiar looking crown. It was so different from the Prussian crown she wore nowadays.

"Hey, I remember that thing. Shouldn't it be in a satchel?" said Eugene.

The Queen stroked the crown with her fingers, and a chill ran up her spine. Had it really only been nine years? Already it seemed like another world and another life. Her other hand moved to cup the squirming new life in her belly.

"Hey... Eugene? If the baby is a girl, can we name it Gothel?"

"After that witch? Blondie, something's up today. You feeling alright?"

"Well, she did raise me. I guess I still have more good memories than bad, even with what she did."

"Ahhhh, I understand. You've got some misplaced nostalgia. Alright, but if it's a boy, he's named Thunder McCoolguy."

"Thunder McCoolguy?"

"You know, from the Adventures of Flynn Rider."

"I've read the Adventures of Flynn Rider. I had it reprinted with you as the main character in that propaganda campaign. Who's Thunder McCoolguy?"

"I see someone hasn't read the revised and improved second edition."

Eugene sighed loudly.

"Oh Blondie, I'm hurt. Here I thought we were supposed to be soulmates."

"Ugh. I'm trying to be serious here. My cousins are being held prisoner."

Eugene gave her the smolder. She squinted. He smoldered harder. She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. The smolder went to maximum power. She turned away. Eugene was giving the smolder all he had. She turned back, seized Eugene and threw herself into him, kissing with a throbbing, hungering passion.

"Mmmm, uhmmm, ohhhh... That never used to work before. No fair!"

"My powers will only get stronger with age, Blondie."

"Oh yeah? How about sixty or seventy, smart guy?"

"I'll be the sexiest grandpa alive. Families will line up for miles to see me in underwear. We'll retool the entire economy around Sexy Grandpa Tourism."

"Oh god."

"I'm going to enjoy having a son called Thunder McCoolguy."

Frost in Moscow

Author Notes: The silver ruble was roughly equivalent to a dollar in value. In modern money, the demanded ransom is about 9.1 billion dollars. Merry Christmas.

"Borscht? Ukha? Pirozhki? Shchi? My chefs are very talented. Whatever you desire, they can make it for you. If you would like, I can recommend some dishes. I understand that you haven't eaten well in quite a while."

The room was ornately decorated. It was lined with art, art from all sorts of ages, from the modern stretching back to the medieval. There were battle scenes, portraits of long dead Tsars, even paintings of peasants. The wood, richly lacquered, sparkled in the glow of the fireplace. Alexander stood beside it, basking in the warmth. The energy was practically surging into him. He turned, appraised the sisters with his hard, reptilian eyes. He nodded, and beckoned them to two seats at the far end of the dining table, then sat at the other end.

"Please, take a seat. If they are uncomfortable, inform me. I have others available. Make yourself at home," said the Tsar.

"Your Imperial Majest..." said Elsa.

"No need for such formalities. You may call me Alexander."

"Why did you summon us here?"

"Ah. You think it's odd for us to be dining like this. There has to be some sort of business here, something behind it. It's weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah, a little bit," said Anna.

The Tsar took a sip of wine. He swished it about his mouth, sampling every aspect of the flavor. His tongue smelled the fragrances, sniffed out the floral and fruit highlights. His eyes flickered with a brilliant spark, dashing to and fro as the data aggregated. As he spoke, the light danced.

"Of course it is. We aren't dealing with friends or family here. This is the game of politics. Ice is beautiful, isn't it, Queen Elsa?"

"What are you getting at?"

"The spiraling snowflakes in their dancing, the way the patterns form and emerge. You rule a winter-bound land. So do I."

"And...?"

"I want to bring winter to Europe. I'm certain that you hate this war as much as I do. You've figured it out by now, I'm sure. An army cannot exist without food, cannot fight without permissive weather. Winter destroys all of this. When the ice comes, there will be peace. Queen Elsa, we should be on the same side."

"Millions would starve."

"And millions will die as this war drags on. Do you think Napoleon would content himself with Europe alone?"

"Perhaps I do."

"I thought the same... once. He is a seductive man. Brilliant, charming, deadly. He told me of how he intended to make Paris the greatest city in the world, of the new Europe he could forge. He told me how Russia, Third Rome, could live with the New Rome. He painted a picture of the world being remade in a more perfect image. He is an excellent liar."

"Or maybe he's never had the chance. He's been locked in war for years upon years. Britain refuses to sue for peace."

"Perhaps. I tried to mediate between the powers. At first I thought it was their stubbornness, but if the whole world stands against one man, who is more likely to be wrong? I looked further, and concluded that Napoleon was a tyrant. A man like him can never sate his ambition."

"But maybe you're wrong. Maybe he would make peace and make the Paris of his dreams."

"Maybe. Maybe he would continue his conquests and burn the whole world."

"So it seems that the central issue..."

"Is whether or not Napoleon is essentially good. A classic. Shall I begin, or will you take the first offensive?"

"I can open. Did Socrates not propose five natures from best to worst?"

"He did."

"Are you not of the philosophical and best disposition?"

"You flatter me, Queen Elsa."

"I propose that Napoleon, as a man of war, is the timocrat. As he is of the second best nature, he is a good man."

"Ah, but the second best nature does not compare to the best. All the other natures pale compared to the one with knowledge, as the others simply happen into truth. Napoleon may choose justly much of the time, but now I disagree with him, and as you yourself have awarded me a philosophic disposition, my opinion is more likely to be the correct one. As such, though he may be good in most circumstances if he is a timocrat, in this one, he errs. Furthermore, he may be of a sort like Meno, and thus be not very good at all. Can we say that Napoleon is not a blustering bully, using force to get his

way? We can suppose that he isn't, but then we assume the conclusion to prove the conclusion. Now, my turn. Consider Kant, and consider war. War is a game of deception and lies. War is killing. War requires foraging-a polite term for stealing. So the character of war is essentially that of murder, lies, and theft. As Napoleon is a warlike man, he is necessarily not a good one."

"And if I disagree with Kant? What if I say that good is giving well-being to the greatest number in the greatest quantities?"

"I see that you keep up with academia."

"In warfare, lying and deception allows for the winning of more complete victories, and without forage, all of the soldiers would starve. Peasants often have potatoes and other sundries stored away for such times. Thus, Napoleon is only doing right by his men."

"But that assumes that the war occurs in the first place. Napoleon may do right by his men, but does he do right by the world? If there was no war, everyone would be even better off."

"But you assume that Napoleon caused the war. If it's a war forced upon him by the other powers, then he has no choice."

"So we arrive back at our original question. Is Napoleon the one at fault? Is he a good man?"

Elsa looked into the Tsar's eyes, the cold, dead stare of winter against the unblinking gaze of the serpent. Anna munched away at some buns.

"I have a counterpoint," said Elsa.

"Go ahead."

"All the men would die for Napoleon, and many of them did. Does that sound like a tyrant to you?"

"A good tyrant manipulates the people to see him as a saint. I should know."

"Then what about my sister? How about my cousin, Rapunzel? They trust him. If there's anything I've learned, it's that family will always be there for you."

"Your sister seems prone to blind loyalty and reckless foolishness."

"Hey, that's not... ooooooh... chocolate!" interrupted Anna.

"As for your cousin? You can't trust family, especially not with such a tenuous connection. My own father and grandmother used me as a pawn in their game. I was to be the worthy heir my father wasn't. I was a tool to use against my grandmother. The history of Russia is rife with brothers scheming against brothers. Wouldn't you say that's a closer relationship than cousins? You want to know something interesting? Just about every war can be described a cousin's war. How is that for keeping it in the family? Family may matter for the common folk, but in the game of thrones, they're only another player. We have no friends or enemies... only interests."

"You're wrong."

"Am I? Let's make a wager."

The frozen grasp of winter met the calculating, mechanical cunning of the snake. Their eyes locked. How well did Elsa know her cousin? It wasn't like Anna. After all these years, Anna was still the only person she could wholeheartedly trust. Elsa nodded.

"Good. I thought you would agree, because the wager is already made. 650 million rubles for the ransom of you two."

"What?"

"Yes, 650 million rubles. It would be foolish to pay such a vast sum for two people. I'm interested to see what kind of rejection your

cousin gives. She, like all of us, also plays the Great Game."

Elsa couldn't say anything to that. She could only hope that she was right.

Fortunes of Men

The Louvre was a beautiful building. Mrs. Aslaugssen walked lightly. It felt as if the sanctity of those hallowed halls could be broken by the slightest indiscretion.

The tour guide continued her speech.

"Here we have Jacques-Louis David's *Donation of the Guilders* . They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but this one is worth quite a bit more, I think. This picture is particularly interesting, because it was commissioned in 1816, during a time when David was transitioning back into his normal classical material after a long period of propaganda material. It's essentially a reprise of the Tennis Court Oath painting that never was, an attempt to paint in history in something close to real time. You see, David was actually rather involved in politics. He was a Jacobin and part of the Committee of General Security, and as such, helped orchestrate the Reign of Terror. Only a stomach bug saved him from being guillotined along with Robespierre. Napoleon took a liking to him, and he survived the wars as a propaganda painting. After the war, he went onto a list of enemies of France, and fled to the court of Corona. The king offered to pardon him and give him a position as a court painter, but David had come to enjoy his exile. *Donation of the Guilders* is one of the last paintings he ever created, along with *Mars Being Disarmed by Venus and the Three Graces*, having been completed in 1823. You can clearly see the mixture of classical elements into the paintings. Many a young history student has been tripped up by it, but contrary to what they might say, Kaiserin Rapunzel did not ever dress in such a manner. The outfit is a reference to *The Coronation of Napoleon*, which is itself a reference to ancient Roman imperial garb. Some of the other classical elements are more subtle. In those overflowing chests of gold and silver, many of the coins are of Roman design, not the rubles they actually were. If you look closely at the Guilders themselves, three of them have the faces of Bailly, Robespierre, and Marat. Of course, that's all background. The story of the painting

itself is also a harrowing tale. Almost immediately after its completion, it became a symbol for German nationalism. It was kept in the Coronan royal palace until 1935, during the unification of Corona and Germany into the Third Reich. From 1935 until the collapse of the Reich in 1946 it was hung in the Reichstag. Soviet soldiers stormed the building, but the painting was already gone. It, and other Nazi treasures, had been spirited away by a Mr. Holtzmann, a minor official in Hitler's faction, who fled to Argentina. When the Mossad tracked him down in 1974 and gave him a long overdue punishment for treason, the painting was recovered and donated to the Louvre."

Mrs. Aslaugssen took a long look into the painting. What secrets did it hide?

Mr. Kalischer took a sip of his Haitian coffee. It was rarer now, what with the revolution nonsense. It only made the taste all the better. He idly flipped through his newspaper. He didn't read any of the headlines or articles, it just gave his hands something to do while he savored the coffee. It tasted like wealth.

His man walked in. Mr. Kalischer raised head to turn and look.

"Mr. Kalischer? The Palace has a request for you," said the messenger.

"Go on then. Time is money."

"They're looking for a buyer for the Polish crown jewels."

"I see. Well, there's the art market, other royals, we can set up meetings with the independe..."

Mr. Kalischer took another swig of coffee then spit it all out.

"What in the blazes? What do you mean they're selling the Polish crown jewels?"

"They're selling the Polish crown jewels, sir."

"Summon the Guilders. We have an executive decision to make."

Rapunzel was stir crazy, stuck in endless pacing. Would they have time to sell the jewels? Would they even be valuable enough? Her thoughts went again to her cousins. Were they suffering in prison? She remembered the time Gothel had chained her. What were they going to do?

"Your Majesty? Mr. Kalischer is here," said the messenger.

"Mr. Kalischer. Have you found a buyer yet?"

"That will no longer be necessary, your Majesty," said Mr. Kalischer.

"What?"

"The Guilders are paying the 650 million rubles in full. Think of it as a service to the country."

"That's far too kind of you, I can't possibly accept."

"Nonsense. Do you realize how much money passes through the Coronan economy each year? It's a pittance, really."

That was a lie, or at least, not a full truth. Though many of the Guilders made a great deal of money, they also had considerable operating expenses. Furthermore, the actual Guilders organization was more like a Chamber of Commerce, collecting a small percentage of profits in exchange for representation and connections. The sum had drained the entire treasury, and quite a few properties had to be mortgaged. Furthermore, at any time, there was only a finite amount of each currency held in reserve. To pay the sum, they had to exhaust completely their reserve of rubles, and then dip deeply into their held precious metals. Normally, such a currency change would have a fee, but they were doing it for themselves this time, so they did not even glean that small return.

"I really don't know what to say. Thank you."

"No, thank you. I'm a simple man, your Majesty. I like my latkes fresh, my coffee Haitian, and my queens... to have all the nobility their station rightfully deserves. My family came here three hundred years ago with nothing, and now look at us. This land has been good to us. How many men have died for this great land recently? Compared to that, this is nothing."

"I can't thank you enough."

"Rule well, my Queen. That's thanks enough for me. If it makes you feel better, your other seven Hanukkah presents are all socks."

Family Trip (Reprise)

The chill wind bit hard into Rapunzel's bones, and not even her thick winter coat could keep its wrath completely away. Alexander had demanded the highest official she could send, and what higher official was there than the Queen herself? Eugene put his hand on her shoulder.

"It really hurts seeing the love of my life like this," said the escape artist formerly known as Flynn Rider.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. I've been through worse," replied the Queen.

"I was talking about the money. Look at that big stack of gold that I'll never see again. You know half the coins have my face on them?"

"Do I need to get the frying pan out?"

"You know you can't resist the smolder anymore. I've become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

Rapunzel gave Eugene a quick peck on the cheek, and Eugene draped his coat over his wife. In the distance, vague forms began to take shape. Carriages rolled in, guarded by men tall and strong. Out stepped a man, face hardened and careworn, eyes fixed with a impassive gaze. It was the Tsar.

"The Tsar of the Russian Empire greets the Empress of the Germans," said Alexander.

"I am no Empress yet," replied Rapunzel.

"You are in all but name. Do you have my payment?" asked the Tsar.

"Yes I do. 650 million rubles, 310 million in coins, 150 million in gold bullion equivalent, and 190 million in silver equivalent."

The Tsar blinked, then stood still in the snow, visibly shaken. Anna and Elsa stepped out of the carriage, and Elsa approached the Tsar.

"You have an extraordinary family, Queen Elsa."

"Yeah. I really do, don't I?" replied the Queen.

Rapunzel beamed back. Eugene puffed out his chest.

"I wish... Are you aware that I had two daughters? Had. They died. I would have fixed the mistakes of my father. I would have raised them right. Why would God take them from me, I wondered. His response was very clear. War is a terrible thing. It has destroyed so many families, why should mine be spared?"

"I know what it's like to feel alone. You don't have to suffer through that."

"Metternich called me a fool. I tried to mediate a peace, but their stubborn pigheadedness destroyed it! Didn't they see that a man like Napoleon wouldn't stop fighting until he died? That he would drown Europe in blood before he allowed his ambitions to die? I wanted to tear his damnable throat out on the spot."

"But you couldn't, could you? It's not right for the ruler of a Great Power to lose control of himself."

"Perhaps Paris will be the city of lights and jewels he promised it could be."

The Tsar turned back to look at Rapunzel.

"We have made an honest war. Let us now make an honest peace. 650 million rubles is a ridiculous sum for a ransom. For the rebuilding of Vilnius, and the repayment of grieving widows and mothers, however, it is fair. You cannot put a value on a life, but this will ease their suffering. Vilnius will rise again, stronger than it was before. With the remainder, I will build new universities across Russia. God

willing, the light of education will destroy the shadows of war once and for all. The men, wagons, and artillery I have captured will be returned. I asked you for the highest emissary possible, and you came personally. As such, I believe you are currently qualified to accept these peace terms," said the Tsar.

"I accept," said Rapunzel.

"Good. I look forward to the day we can beat our swords into plowshares and reforge them no more."

On that day, one of the greatest diplomatic revolutions of the 19th century took place. The Russian-Coronan alliance would stand firm until the Tsarist government was toppled by revolution. But that was not all.

"Heeeeey Elsa? I think you made a friend," said Anna.

They walked down the graveled path, pebbles and twigs crunching beneath their feet.

"Yeah, I guess I did," replied her sister.

"That's great! I'm so proud of you right now. Ooooooh! Maybe if you make like... another hundred, we could throw one of those cool masquerade balls!"

"Let's not push it."

Both of them stopped. Their path had led them to a small village. Napoleon was standing there, in front of one of the buildings. The pair approached cautiously. Napoleon was no longer the classically beautiful man of his youth. He was balding now, and a paunch had formed. His eyes no longer glowed with the fire of ambitious brilliance, the light having been replaced with a cynical genius. He had grown old.

"Marshal Hohenzollern?" asked Napoleon.

"Yes Commander?" replied Anna.

"The 2nd Cavalry Corps has been reconstituted and is awaiting your command."

"I see. Where are they?"

"They lie in the next valley over."

"Understood. Send a messenger to Caulaincourt so he can ready his dragoons."

"Caulaincourt is dead."

"What?"

"Caulaincourt is dead. Fabrefond is dead. The officer corps has been decimated. I have promoted two promising new officers, Stolz and Exelmans. Chastel lives, but he is not the man he used to be. Watier has been transferred to your command."

"What else should I know?"

"The Corps is understrength. It only has 8,500 men in its five divisions. These envelopes contain my orders. Follow the instructions clearly, and only open the envelopes you are instructed to. Corona is under siege by 210,000 Turks. It must be relieved or else our cause is doomed. You must relieve the siege. Ride west as hard as you can."

"Your orders are clear, my Emperor."

"Wait! I was going to celebrate your birthday with you! It was going to be special, I promised!" shouted Elsa.

"Elsa, I told you not to worry about that. Look, I spent nearly a decade wishing I could see you. Now you're out here, with me. Every

day I spend with you is special, you don't need to pick one out like that. Duty calls, sis. Take care of yourself, ok?" replied the Marshal.

"Godspeed, Marshal Hohenzollern," said Napoleon.

The sound of hoof-beats faded into silence.

"Do you really think she can defeat that many troops?" asked Elsa.

"No. I think she can annihilate them."

Many had made the mistake of underestimating Napoleon. The Ottomans were not the first, nor would they be the last. Napoleon had erred in Russia, but he was still one of the most formidable generals the world had ever seen, and his Empire was not doomed yet.

800,000 men had marched into Russia, and only 130,000 had returned. But those 130,000 had been through hell and back, and now nothing short of hell could stop them. Before, he had fresh men and Old Guards. Now his men were veterans all. Napoleon had not yet even begun to fight. Woe to those who believed that his Empire could crumble so easily.

Going Crazy: Intermission

The best thing was that it was over quickly. The proposal was simple enough. Napoleon loved his wife, but needed an heir desperately. Elsa was growing older, and marrying someone of the appropriate rank would open up political dangers. If her husband decided it was time to try to rule *jure uxoris*, that was a whole can of worms. Her battlefield utility was decreasing now that everyone and their mother had a supply of Greek fire, and the dampening of her powers inside Russia had disturbing implications. The arrangement was made. All daughters and sons past the third would be of House Hohenzollern, and the first three sons would be of House Bonaparte. Easy enough, and probably not legal, but Napoleon was the Emperor of Europe. She laid back and thought of Arendelle, while his flabby mass rammed in repeatedly, his remaining hair flopping rhythmically to the speed of the thrusting. Once his business was complete, he wordlessly redressed and left.

Now she was back in Arendelle, eating pickles and chocolate ice cream at 3 in the morning.

"Look at me. I've lost control of my life," said Elsa.

"Yes, you have," replied Sven.

"Hey Kristoff, how's it going?"

Kristoff was sitting atop the reindeer, eyes closed, drool dribbling from his mouth, a faint odor cloud forming around his armpits.

"Kristoff is asleep. You should say hi to me," said Sven.

"Reindeer don't talk."

"I'm talking."

"Kristoff's saying your words for you."

"He's quite soundly asleep. You know he's not talented enough for that."

"Great. So I'm crazy and hallucinating this."

"Quite possible."

"So... Sven. How's baby Olaf doing?"

"His parents are an antisocial ice harvester and an incredibly violent thrill-seeker. She doesn't play peek-a-boo with him. She plays 'Hey a flanking maneuver, I'm gone! BOO! I killed that guy! Look, these are the faces they make! Argh! Hurk! Oof! Oh please, don't kill me!'. Kristoff is naturally socially inept, being raised by rock creatures."

"You're a cynical one. Anna loves children, I'm sure he'll turn out fine."

"Depends on one's definition of fine. Statistically, one of them will die when he's a child causing him to become some sort of masked vigilante using the skills his mother taught him. Of course, you know as well as I do that crime can't be solved so easily. He'll mostly cause property damage while the root problems continue to fester."

"Or you're wrong because you're just a figment of my imagination."

"There are two possibilities here. Either I'm a hyper-intelligent and wise reindeer, in which case my opinion is accurate, or I'm a figment of your imagination, in which case I have access to all of the knowledge about ruling you do, and this represents your own, well-informed opinion."

"Jeez. Since when was I such a heartless bitch?"

"Well, you are a Queen. The game of geopolitics is a dirty one, and you have to consider aggregates and treat people as numbers and causes, not people. It's almost textbook psychopath, really."

"So I'm a psychopath too."

"Your parents were afraid of you for a reason. I mean, think about how you've dealt with things. Two men appeared, both threats. You attempted to terminate them, and almost did. Your own sister shows up, and your subconscious manifests as a snow monster that nearly kills her. You're a mean person."

Elsa's spoon full of ice cream stopped short of her mouth. She set it back down in the bowl, and put the bowl on the counter.

"That was a low blow," said Queen Elsa.

"But I'm just a figment of your imagination, remember? This is just part of the bundle of unresolved issues you have because your parents died."

"So I'm a lunatic that talks to animals. Good."

"Do you really think you're alone?"

"Usually am. One of the perks of being a freaky ice witch."

"Other rulers face the same problems that you do. They, too, send thousands to their deaths and cause great amounts of suffering in exchange for nebulous promises of a better future that don't always pan out. Do you think that doesn't affect them? Behind every king is still a man."

"Are you seriously suggesting that other kings do this? I mean, Rapunzel is perfectly well-adjusted and kind and oh god she has that chameleon, doesn't she?"

"And the English have their own special dog kennel. The chains of commanding weigh heavily."

"Oh god."

"Yup. Why do you think so many kings have gone crazy?"

Elsa reached the end of the hallway. With a flick of her wrist, the roof evaporated, and a new tower sprouted up. A stairway condensed out of thin air, and she walked up it to a brand new room, clean and clear.

"What are you planning now, Queen Elsa?" asked the reindeer.

"If you're so smart, you should be able to tell me. I'm going to paint," replied the Queen.

"Are you any good at painting?"

"Nope. Do I really have to be good at everything?"

"Of course you do, the world is always watching. Be the good girl you always have to be."

"Not now. Right now I can eat chocolate ice and pickles and make a shitty drawing."

"Look at how far the quality of your cathartic releases has fallen. From beautiful ice castles to shitty drawings of countries."

"Well, now ice is part of the job. It's a lot less fun when you realize that ice also kills people."

"Your sister doesn't seem to have a problem with it."

"Well..."

"Well, it's because she's also a crazy person. That sort of happens when your parents and sister ignore you and you have no other human contact for years."

"Make me feel worse, why don't you? Anyways, I have other friends. What about Alexander?"

"He's basically a gender-flipped you. The fact that you would be willing to have sex with him is indicative of your own narcissism."

"I wouldn't..."

"Yeah, you would. You're desperate for love but don't understand it yourself, and years of isolation have destroyed your own social skills in any situation that doesn't involve affairs of state. The fact that he's nearly the same age as you is just a plus. He's also a madman."

"I correspond with a number of professors across Europe."

"You mean you get along with other shut-ins who only deal in theory and academia rather than the dirty practicalities of real life?"

"The peasants like me."

"The peasants that have no ability to consider the big picture since they work all day? The peasants that have never really known you and never will? They're in love with the idea of you, not you. And really, who wouldn't be? The scholar queen who's reforming the country but can still fight, blessed with beauty, intelligence, and charm, able to resist foreign influences while learning their ways, who works tirelessly to protect and better the nation? Who's appropriately aloof but still relatable because of all she's been through. Conceptually, you're **perfect**. Also, the ability to love an ideal person but not people themselves is also crazy."

"So is anyone sane?"

"Kristoff. Just Kristoff."

"Why does everything you say hurt so much?"

"Truth hurts."

"Can you just lie to me instead?"

"I could, but you don't really want that. You've never been to trade knowledge for bliss. That's why you read so much."

"I'm such a lovely person."

"You say that sarcastically, but you are. Your self-loathing is a product of years spent fearing your own power, which hasn't been improved by the killing spree you've made across Europe. By the way, those paintings are awful. Why did you give the countries eyes?"

"It adds character, doesn't it?"

"Don't quit your day job."

"So what happens if you aren't a spawn of my pregnancy-addled mind? Why would you even hang around?"

"If there is intrinsic meaning and good exists, then I am here because I must do good. If it does not, then meaning is mine to dictate and this is what I chose as a purpose. I have seen the cycle of eternal recurrence and willed myself to continue it. I am the Overman. I am destiny's lover and the weaver of fates."

"You're a reindeer."

"Yes."

Elsa surveyed her creation. It was crude, poorly drawn, and massive.

"So, what do you think?"

"It's so simple that a five-year old could draw it, and the only real value comes from what I will dubiously call humor. The jokes don't even make sense half the time because your English is terrible and most of the sentences are a garbled mess. At the same time, it's just deep enough to make you feel smug for understanding it. It's trash that's only slightly better than lowest-common-denominator schlock. So what I'm saying is that it's the only cultural achievement anyone will remember Norway for. Ironic, since it's not even named after Norway. The titular country isn't even drawn right-side up."

"Pretty good?"

"My dear, Polandball is perfection."

Elsa took a seat on the frozen floor. She looked deeply into the reindeer's eyes, her own cold eyes icy and sombre.

"So I'm psychotic, neurotic, asocial, narcissistic, needy, and it's possible that I've completely lost my grip on reality. What would my parents say? What will the future say?"

"They'll call you the Great, or perhaps the Magnificent, or the Splendid. Your parents would be proud."

"Reindeer, you are my greatest ally."

Gate

Maximus was a good horse, and that was legacy enough for him. Horatius was the third son of a Junker family, and he knew well that his end had come. The city of Corona was surrounded on all sides. It was time for a last speech, then they would man the walls and die like men.

"Friends, brothers, comrades. We stand here, outnumbered seven to one by a craven foe. He doubts the valor of Coronan men. He doubts the fervor of our devotion. He doubts the elan of our corps. Let us show him the error of his ways. If he wishes to cross the bridge, let him repave it with Turkish bones. If he wishes to cross the sea, let him make rafts of bloated corpses. If he wishes to cross the walls, let him build a siege ramp of the dead. Guards, the streets of Corona will run inches deep with blood before we bend knee to another."

The sun rose. So it began. Sol Invictus.

Then out spake brave Horatius

the Captain of the Gate

"To every man upon this earth

Death cometh soon or late.

And how can man die better

Than facing fearful odds,

For the ashes of his fathers,

And the temples of his gods,

And the Kingdom Guards did rally

and man the battered walls
And though the Turks did sally
Cannons bursting with deathly pall
The gates held them, tens and twenty
Corona would not fall
So the numbers dwindled
Brave men dying on the wall
And shouted brave Horatius
Corona must not fall
Who will join me in the fighting
Their forces we must stall
We shall try them tens and twenty
We shall defy the hand of fate
Come now, sons and fathers
Let us die here on the gate
Then out spake brave Hilda
who ran a market stall
She had danced with fair Rapunzel
And now heard the clarion call
The gates were being battered

She would hurry to the wall
For how could she die better
Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of her fathers
And the temples of her gods
So the numbers dwindled
Brave men dying on the wall
And shouted brave Horatius
Corona must not fall
Who will join me in the fighting
Their forces we must stall
We shall try them tens and twenty
We shall defy the hand of fate
Come now, sons and fathers
Let us die here on the gate
Then out spake brave Bronomir
Who cleaned the towers tall
He had loved the balloons alighting
And now heard the clarion call
The bridge was thick with fighting

He would hurry to the wall
For how could he die better
Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his gods
So the numbers dwindled
Brave men dying on the wall
And shouted brave Horatius
Corona must not fall
Who will join me in the fighting
Their forces we must stall
We shall try them tens and twenty
We shall defy the hand of fate
Come now, sons and fathers
Let us die here on the gate
And now the noon sun burning
Set fire to their hearts
For the tide was not yet turning
But their Queen's love would now start
And with that distant yearning

For homeland and for kin
Their foe men were now learning
True power grows within
So the numbers dwindled
Brave men dying on the wall
And shouted brave Horatius
Corona must not fall
Who will join me in the fighting
Their forces we must stall
We shall try them tens and twenty
We shall defy the hand of fate
Come now, sons and fathers
Let us die here on the gate
Then out spake brave Lord Bergmann
Who checked proposals royal
He had served with words and papers only
And now heard the clarion call
The garrison was now lonely
He would hurry to the wall
For how could he die better

Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his gods
So the numbers dwindled
Brave men dying on the wall
And shouted brave Horatius
Corona must not fall
Who will join me in the fighting
Their forces we must stall
We shall try them tens and twenty
We shall defy the hand of fate
Come now, sons and fathers
Let us die here on the gate
Then out spake brave young Gawel
Who was but a child, bold and small
He had played games without ending
And now heard the clarion call
A new wave they were then sending
He would hurry to the wall
For how could he die better

Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his gods
So the numbers dwindled
The day passing into night
And though the Coronans sallied
And though they'd bravely fight
The city was still falling
The foe would seize and kill the light
Their forces were too many
It was sure the cause was lost
But then he saw a figure
Riding through the frost
A brave and mighty horseman
A dragoon to fight the shameful loss
And through the distant hillocks
and o'er the envious ridge
Were heard a thousand flintlocks
The fusiliers had crossed the bridge
For the pincer was now striking

Frenchmen poured in from every side

Napoleon had a new Cannae

To those who mocked his pride

So their numbers bolstered

Horatius held strong and brave

Corona stood unconquered

It had the victory it did crave

And so they came and conquered

And fought off fearful odds

For the homeland of their fathers

For the the temples of their gods

Go to the City

The French army marched south. Napoleon had pulled away the 30,000 guarding the Channel and the 40,000 stationed in Italy to relieve the Siege of Corona, and together with the 130,000 men from the Russian campaign, there was still enough to put together an army. You don't win a war by dying for your country, but nor do you win it simply by making your foe die for their country. In order to win, it is necessary to destroy their spirit and break the character of the nation. Invasions of Russia, Vietnam, and Afghanistan bathed the countries in blood, but no matter how many died more would replace them. The strength of Rome was not necessarily its tactics, but its ability to replace its losses and never surrender. The people must be convinced that the cause is unworthy, must be made to feel suffering, must be made guilty. Although armies can be destroyed, they can be replaced at, even if the cost is steep, if the spirit of the people lives on. The people must be whipped into a killing frenzy. The enemy must be made less than human, or else it will feel like murder. If wars were simply a matter of men, then they could all be fought into wars of annihilation. At what point does such a thing stop being war and start being genocide? 1%? 5%? 10%? 20%? 25%?

When the will of people wavers, war becomes impossible. Either the leaders are pressured into surrender, or they try stubbornly to fight on, and the dissenters handicap the effort, causing the enemy to strike and make sausage of their meat and bread of their bones.

So really, what choice was there? The kings had to make monsters of their people, or else they would not fight. The kingdom would be broken, the men enslaved or killed, and the women stolen away. Their land would fade into oblivion. The people must be sacrificed for the good of the people. Die fighting, or die on your knees, it was death either way. So on it went. Disappear the dissenters. Gas the protesters. Ride down the rebels. It was for the greater good.

Constantinople would not hold. The defenses were strong, but wills were weak. If the Turks were willing to fight to the death, Napoleon would need ten times the men to take the city. Mahmud knew this was not the case. He had purged too many foes too quickly, and now the people feared he was a tyrant. He was, but that was besides the point. His tyranny was necessary. A kind king wouldn't be able to push through the reforms the state so desperately needed, and the empire would stay a backwater until it eventually fell apart. Still, he had misstepped. All those reactionaries had their own friends and families, and those friends and family members had their own friends and families. As long as he had Austrians backing him, this could be contained. With the loss of his army, though, his monopoly on force could now be challenged by any sufficiently bold rebels. Populists, nationalists, and liberals would all work together to throw out his "tyrannical foreign puppet" regime.

Their success would be their undoing. They were all natural enemies, and soon enough they would be at each others' throats. Someone would try to fill the power vacuum, and then civil war would follow. Chaos and anarchy would spread. Meanwhile, he could slip through one of the secret exits from the city and continue plotting from exile. Give it a few years, and his return would be praised as that of a noble patriot restoring order and putting down craven, power-hungry malcontents. It would give him the political capital he needed to push through the remaining reforms, and it would repair his image. It would just take a little time. Inevitably the revolution would consume its own children. It was clear that Napoleon would accept this victory, as it would allow him to seal one of the fronts. At the same time, it would not look like a betrayal to Mahmud's Austrian allies. The city would be lost temporarily, but the good people of Istanbul would be sure to tire of the foreign French presence. A good king could turn adversity into strength. A good king could be patient. Centuries ago, the decline of the Byzantine empire had been temporarily halted by Alexius I. Mahmud was certain that Constantinople could gift him an equally great feat.

"Rest easy, Christendom. Barbarossa's host has come at last," said Marshal Hohenzollern.

"Eh? That doesn't sound like you Commander," replied Exelmanns.

"Yeah, my sister told me to say that when we got here."

The French Army stood outside the walls of Constantinople. Inside, the garrisons changed. The Sultan had shown his true colors, and the people now hurried to establish new leadership.

The Gem of the East threw open its doors for the French invaders. Walls that could not be breached by fire were breached by treachery. The Republic of Istanbul was born.

Greater Germany

"He simply can't be allowed to live. Journalism sways people, and republicanism would undermine everything we're working for. Even if he's exiled, he'll influence those here and make it difficult for us to consolidate over the north," said the noble.

"Can't we just starve and flog his family until he recants?"

"I realize that you prefer to be merciful, but that's not an option in this case. The man is married to his cause. No family," he said with a mocking smirk.

"I see. Make him disappear then."

"I hear and obey, my Queen."

The man scurried out of the room. Pascal gave Rapunzel a dirty look.

"Don't look at me like that, it has to be done."

The chameleon looked rather skeptical. Rapunzel began to walk back to her bedchambers.

"Oh come on. I've even kept you alive all these years, and this is how you repay me?"

The chameleon raised an eyescale.

"Ok, so there isn't enough magic left to use on anything bigger. I still chose you, because you're my very best chameleon friend. Besides, republics can't fight wars. What's easier to rally around, a Queen or a President? Give the people a vote, and they'll vote to end the war."

The chameleon nodded.

"Well peace isn't an option. Austria would dismantle Corona if it had the chance. And then what?"

The chameleon shrugged. Rapunzel jumped into her bed, causing some down and thread to fly into the air and float there. She buried her face in a pillow, and silently wished she could wrap herself up in her hair. There wasn't enough of it anymore, though. She turned and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Life was so much simpler in the tower

Look at you, still a sapling, still a sprout

You know why we build forts and not bowers

That's right... to keep Austriiaaannns out

Guess I always knew this day was coming

Knew someday I'd go and leave the nest

Collect taxes, pay the debt, reinforce inlets

Patriaaaaaa knoooooows best!"

Rapunzel spun around, hopped off the bed, donned a spiky pickelhaube and began to mock goosestep.

"Country knows best

Listen to your Empress

It's a scary world out there

Country knows best

Serve and guard the homeland

Keep the borders strong with care

Liberals, news, republicans, auslanders

Rebels and rakes, the Hague

Also armed barques

Brits with shitty teeth

Stop, no more, I'll just upset me"

She skipped by a window where servants were scraping off dried blood and congealed fat. As she passed, they all saluted.

"Fatherland is here, Empress will protect you

People, here's what I suggest

Stay true and loyal, don't betray and spoil

Patriaaaaaa knooooows best!"

She stopped and leaned against one of the battlements.

"Oh Pascal. Why do we have to grow up?"

A full decade since she had left the tower. In the end, she didn't get enough time to know her real father. At the funeral, she had wondered why he had disarmed the country. It was an act of mourning, her mother had explained. Over 2% of the country's population was in the standing army, which made it very important to the people. He had also reinstated torture in a melancholy rage. That had come in handy when the angry, workless youth became enchanted by the ideals of the then fledgling French revolution. Hands? Eyes? Legs? Teeth? Lose a few of those, and you begin to reconsider republicanism. As it turned out, that was where Snuggly Ducklings came from. She had asked why they couldn't be a trading country after that. Her mother shook her head sadly, said that Corona had few natural resources, except in Silesia, which they had taken from the Austrians. At the same time, it was too large to be like

Switzerland or the Netherlands. Hegemony had to be established over Germany so that they could proclaim a Greater Germany and extract the resources there. Then, maybe, there could be peace.

"Seven PM, the usual evening lineup...

Start on the wars and fight til the treasury's lean

Polish uhlans, twelve-pounders, and infantry line up

Fight again and by then fields are red more than green...

And I'll keep wondering and wondering...

When will my Reich begin?

Oh, when can the peace begin?"

The sun spent its last few flickering rays, and gas lamps began to glimmer to life. The sea glared back, a solid sheet of obsidian wrapping around the island. Mr. Johannes Glucksberg stepped forward, a jaunty spring in his step. One section of the bridge was too weak, and gave way. Unfortunately, he had never learned to swim. He drowned, and his corpse washed ashore the next day. A tragic end to a promising young journalist.

Goodbye

Northern Holstein was his. Sjaelland was his. Only Weselton stood between him and the glory he so righteously deserved. The palace was completely unguarded, just like one in Copenhagen. What could those two old bastards be planning? They wanted him to conquer, but why? He jogged ahead, past the clanking rattle of an old steam boiler, through a twisted maze of pipes and stairways.

He arrived in the great hall of Duke Weselton's palace. His godfather was waiting for him, shirt stuffed and toupee coiffed, looking every bit like the ridiculous peacock he was. The duke turned around, looked at him, and did a little clucking dance. Hans walked forward.

"Alright, you old fool. It's time for you to spill your secrets," said Hans.

"My secrets? What secrets? Who are you, again?" asked the Duke.

"The senile act won't work on me."

"Who says it's an act? Old Weselton really is losing his mind. Even worse of an incompetent schemer that he was before!"

"Oh please."

"Oh, alright. Let's start with the elephant in the room. Your father never loved you. What a shocker, eh? Weselton really knows how to throw those punches! Bam, zip, zoom! Hey, want to know something else? It's really easy to discipline children into not ignoring one of your sons for literal years! He didn't do it because he was planning this!"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh yes, yes. Make the younger son suffer, lavish love and gold on the older ones, and he'll grow bitter. Give the eldest a boat, why not?"

Then the younger son will learn to plot and scheme, he'll grow ambitious. Your father read ancient stories of Denmark to you for a reason-so that Denmark would grow in your mind. Then you would try to make it again."

"And I succeeded! So Father succeeded, he made the heir he deserved. Good. Now die and let me claim my birthright."

"Ah, ah, ah. Not so fast. You're not the king Denmark needs. You're a schemer. Denmark is going to be in a fragile position. It needs someone dopey, likable, and easy to see as not a threat. It needs your brother Eric. Do you think countries are really run by kings anymore? They're run by intricate bureaucracies with kings making final decisions at most. With you, there's always the risk of some scandal or scheme coming to light that attracts too much attention. But with Eric, there is no such risk. He is a kind and simpleminded fool. In the past, kings were military leaders. Then they became schemers. Then bureaucrats. Now? Figureheads, symbols of the nation. Eric will make a good one."

"Excuse me? I've done all the work. I've conquered all of the land. It's mine by right and by steel."

"It is. But you don't have an heir, do you? You've been too busy to have legitimate children. When you die, it'll all go to Eric."

Hans' eyes began to narrow.

"You see, I've no legal heir, so I've designated my lands to fall to Eric. If you seize them and die, they go to Eric. Either way, they belong to him. Corona could contest this, but it's far too embroiled in the war, and in the coming peace, the other powers will have a vested interest in preserving fledgeling new Denmark, as it removes land from Corona's sphere of influence. Denmark will live," said Weselton.

"And if I don't die?"

"You're already dead, my boy. You see, you don't live as long as I have by actually being an incompetent schemer. If I was just a schemer at this station, I would be eliminated for being a threat. If I was just incompetent, someone else would gobble me up. But both? They'd like to take my land, but I'm an unpredictable element, and my vengeance might be just crazy enough to work, and I'm not a good enough schemer to be high on the list of threats. My plan to kill Elsa was just a red herring. If I really wanted to dispose of her, I'd give my men guns. But then Corona would destroy me. Your scheme, however, only worked so well through a ridiculous streak of luck. Who would've guessed the Princess would be so gullible, or eternal winter would set in, or that you'd be accepted as regent? You're an impatient fool who's blundered into success. And yet you still felt the need to brag about it. Such petty hunger for validation. The difference between you and me is that I actually had dreams, once. Everything about you is a lie designed to get as much power as you can, and even that was engineered. By the way, this whole speech was a distraction while the boiler overloaded. Steam explosions are quite deadly, but you could've escaped through a window or door. Goodbye Hans."

Hans began to turn and run, but the floor burst underneath him, and both he and Duke Weselton were engulfed in a cloud of smoke, boiling them alive.

The King is dead. Long live Eric I, King of **Denmark** .

Good Ol' Boys

"Hey Grandpa, why do you always stop at that statue?"

"Well... it's a long story."

"Tell me!"

"Alright. It was back in the big one..."

What can I tell you? It was hot. Hotter than a steam bath. Hotter than the outback. Hotter than the devil's armpit as he gives himself a lava loofah down in the asscrack of the Earth. I'll be damned if it wasn't humid too. So basically, it was hot, wet, and pouring rain like God himself was pissing on us, and really, if you had told me that then, I woulda believed you. I mean, what kind of an asshole sends 500 fuckers to fight over 5000 of the Nip's best? And hell, we were shit. You know what our general ranked us? F. We deserved it too. All we knew how to do was dig trenches. Tell me what a trench is gonna do to a mad Jap cunt charging you with a goddamn katana? We could shit in them and then bury ourselves for the good that did.

Bataan Bunch, smartest generals this side of the Pacific, made us the first line of defense, and there was only one line. Them. Us. Port Moresby. Australia was being served up to the Emprah on a silver platter, and that was that. So that bludger MacArthur sends up out to go on a hike, and hike we did.

Hey kiddo? If someone gives you a free vacation to New Guinea, rip off their scrote and feed it down the bastard's throat. New Guinea is a nightmare. How we were supposed to know that? We were fucking idiots. We were the shittiest men in a shitty army that was about to get shredded by some Japs, and the Allies thought it was hilarious. Remember the rain? Rain don't go well with socks. Our feet got wet. Our feet got so wet they started rotting off. Had to get new socks, see? There weren't any new fucking socks, it was a ass sucking

jungle! There were monkeys, and they threw shit at you, and you sucked it up because ammo's precious and you just eat that shit up with a shit-eating grin, sir, yes, sir.

Miserable. They had stairs there. Heh, bit of a prank to play on the Aussies, stairs. Those stairs weren't stairs. They were indents carved into sheer rock walls. You try climbing a rock wall without climbing gear before? It's fucking awful, and you fall and crack something, then you get back up. We were going yards per hour. Not miles, yards. Kokoda wasn't a trail. Kokoda was a sign from the natives saying "Go fuck yourself". I fell more times than I can count, probably cause my brain's been addled all these years from all those falls.

So we make camp, and I meet this guy. Calls himself Tommy, says he's got a bit of princely blood in him. Way, way, way back, his great-great-great-grandmum got knocked up by some visiting Dane. He's got this stupid dopey grin, and some ugly ass sideburns, and he looks like he belong more in a half-baked fairy tale than the army. I called his great-great-grandmum a British slag and said his princely heritage wasn't worth more than the slime congealing on my boots. Hoo boy. It was just a bit of banter, but he got red as a beet. His eyes, they were spitting venom. So I laid off. Still, the way he held himself nearly made me piss myself, and I didn't have enough water in me to piss.

Anyways, where was I? Yeah, fighting. Honestly, can barely recall it. You know what I remember? I remember crapping my pants over and over and over again. I remember drinking only coffee and eating crackers. I remember noise. I like to go out to the range now and then. They give you ear protection there. Not there. You want some fancy ear protection, you fuck off. Just a bunch of rattling and banging, and dumping mags into small animals that spooked you, and running and falling. I did a lot more falling. We ran a lot. There were so many of them, we had to run a lot. I got lost. There's nothing out there but leaves, and trees, and then leaves again, then you run into a pool full of mosquitoes because it just keeps raining and the

bugs love you, and then you run into the same tree again except that you can't tell it's the same goddamn tree because a jungle is millions of fucking trees. Then you go around the tree and run straight into a chinky-eyed fucker, and he's dead before you even blink because your fucking muscles are thinking for you, and your muscles are hard cunts. Then you fall through the floor because it's not a goddamn floor, it's a tree you somehow got on top of, and you land on a fucker and you gut him with a knife because there's no time to think because he's gonna chop your head off if you don't and you need his stuff anyways. So then I run into Tommy again, and he's got this crazed look in his eyes, and his gun is pointing right at me. I crapped my pants again. He shoots, and I hear the bullet whiz by, and then I don't anymore because my ear just got blown off, and I grab it and scream because he's a crazy fucker and I'm rolling around in my own blood and the swampy water, and the bugs crawling all over me, and I catch a good look of a Jap with his head blown clean to bits, jaw bone dangling off a tree, and I realize that fucking Tommy just saved my life.

So it's just me and Tommy and the Kokoda. And then we run into some more guys, and it's fucking Kingsbury, and then it's not Kingsbury anymore because he's got the Bren and he's spraying that machine gun everywhere because we're completely fucking surrounded because that crotchhole MacArthur sent us up against 10 times more men than we had, and the barrel overheats and it steams everything up and he looks like a freaking avenging angel, pushing straight through that cloud of smoke and steam, and then that barrel is melting and his hands are melting off too, and he's glowing with firey light because he's on fire, and a Jap sniper blasts him, and then he's bleeding and they're bleeding and it's all over. And we move on, and nothing really makes sense because you don't sleep because they'll fucking kill you if you sleep, and you don't eat because there's nothing to eat, and you don't cry because the sky's crying for you.

And then there's mortars flying everywhere, and the ground is being torn apart, not like it wasn't already. The Kokoda was already littered

with razor rocks everywhere, and now they were filling it with great big holes, and the world slows down and stops and I shove Tommy down because the mortar is bursting and the heat goes over the rock and scorches my back, and shrapnel fucks up his leg. You could see the bone and the meat, and it was just dripping off, like slow-cooked ribs. I wanted to cry, but instead I let the mosquitoes at him. See, we couldn't chop the limbs off and cauterize, because how the fuck am I supposed to start a fire or get some heat? I lost my knife twenty Japs back, let alone some medical saw. But those mosquitoes are brutal. They'll eat your meat any chance they get. So I watch them, and they just eat all of that flesh right off, and I snap away the bone because if he didn't lose that, it'd rot and he'd die, and he's crying and I'm not and I'm wishing I could be boxing a roo because getting my face rearranged is much nicer than that. Or digging another trench. Training us to dig fucking trenches. I scare away those vicious fucking flies before they eat the rest of him up, and then I'm carrying him the rest of the way, so he's like a turret gunner and I'm a tank.

Norrish got shot up four times in the chest. Every time he breathed, he was breathing out blood. His inner organs had been torn to bits. That fucker lived. This continent is a murder continent and we are its murder children. You know what I learned? Nothing in the world can kill Aussies. The nukes'll fall and the world will just be us and the roaches. And then a nade drops by my feet and I crap myself for the thousandth fucking time, and Tommy is hauling himself off my shoulder and he falls onto the nade, and that's it. He's gone. All I did for him was make fun of his stupid fucking Danish prince, and he died for me. I should've died, but I didn't. So he asks me to take care of his sister, and I do, and I made your dad and your aunts and your uncles, and I watched the sun set over Kokoda. Those shitty fucking cliffs littered with the Jap dead. You know what I realized then? Some of those fuckers would've had kids too, and maybe they did. And those kids, those kids weren't their dads. Those kids would grow up to be good folks, and maybe their dads were good folks too. And that's why... that's why you're not going to be your dad. You're gonna make me proud, and you're different from him. It's not just because

you've got an axe wound and he had a pecker, it's cause I see that fire in you. That fire in your eyes that he used to have before he went out and came back a drunk and mean motherfucker. Good night sweetie. What do we say to the monsters?

"Fuck off, we're full!"

"And then we grab 'em and beat the snot out of them. You're a top fucking cunt, lassie, and don't you ever change."

Author Notes: Those mosquitoes weren't mosquitoes, those were blowflies.

Highly Inappropriate Bondin:Intermission

Elsa laid down on the stone slab, thinking about times gone by. The room was so quiet, mostly because it was in the dungeons and when they had repaired the wall, they had removed the window. The manacles weren't on her at the moment, but they were there. A special design. #328, custom-made for the King and Queen in 1801 at the Dowlais Ironworks in Sheffield. Clean, elegant, stylish. Several pairs of them. Designed to restrict movement and hopefully contain the threat. Those were the notes at the bottom of the order sheet, written by her father's hand.

There was someone outside. An assassin? No, they wouldn't be loud in such a manner. Oh, of course that was it, Alexander was visiting again. Just as she turned her head, Alexander opened the door. He cocked an eyebrow.

"Planning a bit of light bondage, Queen Elsa?" asked the Tsar.

"No, just thinking... about my parents," replied Elsa.

"While lying on something vaguely like a bed and playing with manacles? I feel the need to repeat my first question."

"My parents ordered those manacles for me. Called me a threat. They didn't tell me either. One day, I requested some official budgets so that I could learn how everything really worked, and there it was, staring me in the face."

"So what happened next?"

"Well, I panicked. Rolled up into a little ball, cried a little. Cried a lot. I got scared, and then came the news that they were lost at sea. I suppose that's where it started, me becoming this murderous monster, is right then and there. Now look at me, killing thousands of people at once."

"I understand completely."

"You do?"

"Yes. I killed my father as well. I didn't want to, but the nobles were agitating for it. One day, a man walks up to me, hands me a crown with my father's blood still on it. Tells me to grow up, it's time to be a man, then tells me to grow up again, because you have to be a king."

"Oh. That must've been awful."

"It was. Sometimes I still dream of him judging me. But what was there to be done? Grandmother had groomed me to be heir, not him. He was going to run the country into the ground. When the old pack leader grows infirm, he must be replaced or the whole pride will suffer."

"My father was still young though. He was a good king."

"He could never be half the king you are. Arendelle now consorts with Great Powers, trades with the whole world. Your currency and bureaucratic reforms have been top-notch. If he had gone on ruling? Perhaps Arendelle wouldn't see its first industrialization until fifty years later."

"Then why do I still feel so awful?"

"I ask myself the same question."

Alexander offered Elsa his hand, and she took it. She stood up. They walked outside the cramped little cell, into one of the icy halls.

"Of course, mistresses help too. I've plenty," said Alexander.

"But... ugh. All the men are so imperfect," replied the Queen.

"Always the perfectionist, aren't you?"

"Everyone is watching."

"They're not watching you have sexual relations, are they?"

"I'm watching!"

"So it's not about everyone else? Everyone has flaws, my dear.
Everyone is a bit of a fixer upper."

Is it the stupid way they talk? Or how they think with just their cock?

Or the irrational, illogical way they decide on all their lifes' affairs

**Don't they read a single book? Even check if books are
cooked?**

I've never met a single man who reads the Prince by Machiavelli

*You've got to forgive them all their flaws, because it's out of natural
laws*

*To try and have sex with twelve or four or five or maybe even fifty
three*

They're just a bit of a fixer upper

But the meat is plenty fine

They're just a bit of a fixer upper

But it's easy with some wine

**But I'm a Queen of Nation-State, my lovers should all be first-
rate**

**Professors have brains and those youngsters have brawn but
both is not my fate**

Well, they're just a bit of a fixer upper

Either-or is still quite nice

They're just a bit of a fixer upper

Just give them a bit of the ice and spice

But they've never had to kill! Or even learned about laws and bills!

And their biggest cause for fucking is just to get a little thrill

They're just a bit of a fixer upper

You can always adjust to taste

They're just a bit of a fixer upper

Spares exist to fill a place

"Are we really doing a song about extramarital affairs right now? The meter isn't even right." asked the Queen.

"Do you feel better?" asked the Tsar.

"Yes, actually."

"Well, that's what friends are for."

Their little song and dance number had taken them into the dining hall, and Elsa reached over and grabbed a bottle of wine. She poured a glass for both herself and the Russian Emperor.

"Here's to friendship," said Elsa as she reached out her glass.

The Tsar clinked his glass against hers, completing the toast.

"And here's to a healthy stable of lovers, which I hope we both soon have," replied the Tsar.

They both drank.

"You know, I'd love to tour the West when this war is finally over. Not a tour like Peter's though, just one to see all of the beauty and wonder there is. I can think of no one better as a guide than you and your family."

"I'd love that, Alex."

"To a new tour of the West! May St. Petersburg one day rival all the cities of the world!"

"To St. Petersburg!"

They toasted again, and downed some more of Arendelle's finest wine. At the speed at which they were drinking, they hardly had the chance to fully appreciate the subtle aromas and floral flavors of the drink, but that wasn't their most pressing concern.

"Hey, Alex?"

"Hmm?"

"You've always wanted Finland, right?"

"It is the rightful land of Russia, ever since it was claimed by Novgorod."

"Well, this is the perfect time, isn't it? Sweden's real king is an invalid, and they're being ruled by a council of military leaders. They haven't found a suitable "son" for the good king yet, and their government lacks legitimacy. They're still drained of manpower and money because of that idiot Gustav. Who's going to be able to help them now? For that matter, who will care? The very existence of government by the military threatens the stability of monarchy. Let's go ahead and invade them."

"You're absolutely right, Elsa. To invading Finland!"

"To invading Finland!"

They drank again. 1810, a year of fresh blood on the snow. The Portuguese had openly declared against the French, forming the Fifth Coalition, and an invasion of the Iberian peninsula was needed to maintain Napoleon's control on the continent. Now Russia would add a new war to that list: an invasion of Finland.

Author Note: Point of clarification, Elsa probably didn't cause the storm that killed her parents, although cold can change weather patterns. What's important is that she was scared, then her parents died, and we've established that fear causes her powers to activate, so she blames herself. And really, isn't that what's most important? That you blame yourself for everything and eventually jump off a bridge due to too much repressed self-loathing?

Hispania

"The Spanish peasantry are getting upset."

"Are they now?"

Anna had volunteered for the Forlorn Hope. It would keep morale up, to see that a general was as willing to risk their life as the rank and file. The assault wouldn't be too dangerous anyways. Napoleon had successfully decapitated the Spanish command structure, and the garrison commanders would be completely unaware that war was upon them.

"It seems they're rather upset that we're looting from their homes and land."

"Well, kill off the rebel leadership and the movement will collapse."

She had a mask in her kit now. It had been adapted from a design used by Coronan miners as they worked in Silesia. The Stabbington Brothers and other elements of the Secret Police had weaseled out rumors of a new British weapon design. The men readied the ladders. They crept forward through the inky blanket of night, and threw the ladders up onto the walls. Once they were up, the other brigades would move out of hiding and assault. If the enemy resisted, they had to buy as much time for the next wave as they could, at the price of their lives if needed.

"Except we haven't found any leadership so far, that or all the men we've captured are far too dedicated to crack. Either isn't a good sign."

"So you're seriously saying autonomous cells of rebel movements are popping up all across the country without any outside direction?"

She was almost up the walls. With one hand, she removed the "ribbons" in her hair. A quick rearranging, and she had a garrote. She

grabbed him, strangled him, threw him off the walls. He splattered onto the grass with a wet thud. Then she scrabbled up the ladder and took a look around the walls. In moments, she spotted the figure she was looking for, walking through the middle of the fort, oblivious. There were prayers coming from a church somewhere. She shouldered her musket, braced herself, and fired. The bullet hurtled through the air, struck the man in the leg. It shattered, bone fragments and meat forming a neat little circle on the gravity. The sound of the shot cracked the air, and so did his warbling scream. Once more, the silence came. The Spaniards would know now. Other French on other parts of the walls lit their torches. They were up as well. Hopefully, with their walls already gone, and the commander dead, they would surrender quickly.

"Can't we kill them? We've destroyed massive armies before."

"They blend back into the people with every strike."

A few of them ran up, then immediately threw down their guns. First responders, eh? There were too many French on the walls for a couple of men to stem the flow. The prayers had stopped. All the statues around were bright and clean, although they looked a bit scratched up. Almost as if they had been scraped clean. Not a bit of patina to be seen. Anna ordered her men to advance further in, but to do so cautiously. There should be more enemy reinforcements coming, or someone to surrender. It was far too quiet. Her eyes widened.

"Masks on!"

"So kill the people! Make pyramids of their skulls, intimidate them into surrender."

"Are you listening to yourself, Hohenzollern? That's brutality! Madness!"

The shells slammed into the stone walls. Green fumes steamed up from them, engulfing them. They tickled at her mask, probed for

weakness. She was stumbling, walking through the cloud. It was everywhere, blocking out her lenses and hiding the world away. She found her way out of the cloud, knees hit the cold hard rock. Above her was the clear sky. The gas was fading away. Behind her lay bodies of those who had asphyxiated, frozen in half-twitches, arms grasping at their throats, eye bulged out and grotesque, flesh blue and clotted. Others had misstepped with the masks blinding them, and had fallen from the walls to grisly deaths.

"I don't see you coming up with any ideas."

"What about your sister? Why don't we bring her in and freeze the whole damn country?"

Nuns wheeled up some of the new modified Nock guns. Nuns? The guns began to spray over the walkway, a bullet hail drenching the walls. It had only lasted a few seconds, but another dozen of them were dead. God only knew what kind of havoc improved guns like that and longer lasting gas could make. Would it even be possible to make assaults anymore? Another shell slammed into them. Private DuPont was vaporized, leaving not a trace behind. A hot white pain shot up her spine, a cutting heat embedded in her back. She reached backwards, felt a slight wetness. Was it her blood? It didn't matter. She reloaded her gun. Took aim, missed. The shot was good enough though, it blasted away a bit of rock and one of the nuns lost her footing and met her Lord. Anna affixed her bayonet, charged, and ran the other nun through. The nuns on the other side of the wall were also dispatched. Down the stairs, to ground level. Down again, into a twisting maze lying beneath the fort.

"That'll do the same thing, just slower and not as clean. Everyone'll starve, even us. Do you want to make another Russian campaign?"

"We can't sit by and do nothing, they'll whittle us down."

Her depth perception was awful with one eye. Her vision wasn't the best anymore, even in ideal circumstances. Smoke was filling the corridors, they were burning the whole place down. The acrid stench

of fire filled the air. That was her world, a tangled tumbleweed of halls, filtered through smoke and haze, then filtered again through a narrow lens, then one last time through her one good eye. She saw someone leader-like through the smoke. She ran towards the figure. It was an old woman, the Mother Superior. Kill her, and the defenders collapse. They both drew swords. The smoke trailed from the Marshal's mask and uniform, like wings and horns. The nun was clumsy with hers, her thrusts and chops effortlessly dodged or parried. Anna brought down her saber with crushing force, and the nun put up her guard. Again, and again came the blows, with hammer force. Finally, one of the strikes knocked the nun's sword away, and it hit the ground with a clatter. The impact force traveled down the nun's arm with terrifying power. With her other arm, she makes the sign of the Cross, and tries to run. Anna moved in to deliver the killing blow, when suddenly a sharp pain shot through her back. She doubled over, clutching herself as the nun makes her escape. Then, nothing. Once again, silence, but for the crackling of the flame and the whimpering cries of the dying. The fort was theirs.

"They have to be getting orders from the British. We'll push into Portugal, seize the ports, and then the orders will stop and the resistance will end."

"God have mercy on all our souls."

Horrifically Inappropriate Moral

They had taken control of a pub. Much of the wooden furniture had been torn out and converted into barricades. The beer stores were currently being depleted at an astonishing rate. Anna was digging into a lemon cake as she walked. It was a good time to celebrate, her sister was finally back with her. She wiped a bit of orphan blood from her boots. Elsa was sitting at the end of the bar, eyes fixed firmly on a still full mug of beer. Anna took the seat next to her sister.

"Hey there sis! Why are you so down?" asked Anna.

"Are we the bad guys?" asked Queen Elsa.

"Wha?"

"It would all make sense, wouldn't it? We're the evil Empire. We've got the brilliant warlord who's won dozens of crushing victories as he spreads his domain across the land. We're crushing all the native kingdoms and bringing them into the 'European system'. Doesn't that name just send shivers up your spine? Look at me! I'm a literal Witch-Queen making an icy trail of death across the continent. Does that sound like the good guys to you?"

"Oh come on, you're exaggerating."

"You've got orphan blood on your boots."

"They were harboring insurgents! It had to be done. Besides, I found this nice little lemon cake before I burned the place down, so it's like God giving me a thumbs up."

"Killing. Orphans."

"Orphans aren't all good, you know! If you're right, and we're villains, then we're not good, and we're orphans, so if you're right you can't

be right! Argumento adidas absurdlio, quod ergo facto, killing orphans isn't especially bad."

"Except all you've done is reduce the badness down to the level of killing regular civilians, which is still really, really evil."

"Well, maybe I'm not as good at this knowing things thing as you, and maybe I can't argue about this! Maybe we are the bad guys! Oh god, oh god. What the hell is wrong with me?"

Anna turned to face the bar, and downed a mug of beer in one gulp.

"It's like this every year! Every time, this same conversation, and all because of me! Every year, I try to convince you to be happy, and it doesn't work, and... and I know why... oh god, I know why... I've always known..."

Anna grabbed a bottle of absinthe as tears trickled down her face.

"It's because of me! Always me. I ruined your coronation, I ruined your castle, I'm ruining your life right now! Because I'm a big stupid dummy who doesn't understand anything. I'm not... I'm not as good as those books as you..."

"Anna, no, that's not what I meant-"

"All the words, they get so confusing. And I'm reading one about population dem... demo... demographics, and one thing sticks in my head, just one thing because nothing makes sense because I'm not that smart, and it's... the second son, throughout history, has often found solace in war. I was the spare, but I could be like my hero! I could be Joan!"

"Anna..."

"It was everything I dreamed it could be! I was the hero, I was useful, I was finally good at something! But then... then your sad eyes, oh god... please... you were so sad all the time... I wanted to take care

of everything, make sure you didn't worry, make you happy, but I couldn't! I couldn't! I wasn't good enough, I've never been good enough! I'm... just the screwup."

"You're not a screwup, Anna!"

"Yes I am! Look at us! We're going to have this argument again and again and again because you're just so good, and kind, and you can't bring yourself to hurt anyone, and I've got an ice cold heart full of murder. When I met a snow monster, first thing I did was attack, then I attacked it again! Again and again and again and again and I can't stop myself from thinking... in the end... we're going to kill each other, aren't we?"

"I could never hurt you."

"But you'll have to because I'm a monster. You'll have to because you love everyone and I don't, and I kill them. It hurts you so much to cause pain, and I keep bringing you back here and making you. Tell me the truth... it hurts you to be here, doesn't it? All I do is hurt you."

"You don't hurt me, Anna, why would you even say that?"

"LIAR!"

Anna grabbed a beer bottle, and threw it into the ground, where it shattered into a thousand crystalline pieces. Outside, the sky rumbled as thunderclouds gathered. The warm glow of the pub lanterns made a bridge of light stretching from Anna towards the outside. Anna wiped snot from her nose as she tried to hold back the gulping, choking sobs. She failed. Raindrops fell into the absinthe.

"Please stop crying. Please. I want to see that smile again. You told me that smile couldn't ever break."

"A little bit of water improves the flavor."

"Why are you drinking right now? Please, stop drinking. Look at me. I care about you. Stop crying, please."

"Drinking is good. Feels good."

"Is this why you drink? Because you're scared that you're hurting me?"

"I'm not scared for them. Who cares if I kill them? I've never met them, I don't give a damn about their friends or family. But every time I kill, I know it hurts you. You care about them even though you don't even know them. You're just so... so kind, and sweet, and giving..."

"Anna, please stop crying. You don't hurt me and I could never hurt you."

"You say that now, but I'm still a killer and a monster, and you hate that. You just want everyone to be happy, and you work so hard... so hard to make everyone happy, and I just burn it all down. All it'll take... is one bad day, one bad day for either of us, to push us over the edge and then it's all over."

"You're not a monster! Why do you keep saying that?"

"Really now? Because we're too different, you and I. You were always the good girl, the Queen, always studying, learning, trying to see every angle. And then there was me, the spare, the fuck-up. I don't understand how you can care about everyone so much and not go crazy! How are you so perfect when... when I'm this! I have orphan blood on my shoes!"

"It's not any worse than other blood, I can clean it off, stop crying, please."

"We're just going to go through this again, and again, forever, until one of us snaps, because I'm a killer and you're the good Queen. And it wouldn't be so bad, except you're always so sad. Elsa, go

home. I'm killing you. I'm taking your soul and I'm smashing it to itty-bitty bits."

It was raining outside. Anna walked out the door, bridge of light beneath her feet. Elsa stared out into the rainy field. Raindrops plinked off of Anna's helmet.

Elsa crossed the bridge, and hugged Anna from behind.

"I can be a bad guy," said Elsa.

"I don't want to make you be a bad guy, I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"No, I want to be a bad guy."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Kant's full of shit anyways. And you can't really do any sort of utilitarian moral calculus in practice. Who's to say what's right and wrong, really?"

"I didn't understand any of that."

"Okay. I'd kick a million puppies for you. I'd kick a billion. I'd tear out a baby's beating heart and sacrifice it to Satan."

"You really mean that?"

"In the end, all we have is each other. You're worth the world to me. Let's bully those small countries. We'll build an evil Empire with Napoleon. We'll kill all of the orphans, all of them. We'll harvest people's skulls."

"You mean..."

"Yup. I'd burn down the women, poison the houses, and rape the water."

"Do... do you want to build a skull throne?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. Doesn't even have to be a skull throne."

Elsa held Anna, and kissed her softly on the back of her head. The rain came pouring down, bridge of light between them. The blood washed off of Anna's boots.

His Garment Passes

" The guerrilla must swim in the people as the fish swims in the sea."
- Mao Zedong

The spirit of resistance that now fueled the Spanish insurgency was also burning bright in South America. At the same time the Spaniards were throwing off the French yoke, Southern American countries were throwing off the Spanish yoke. It was the end of an era. Just as the French were finding that occupation of Spain would be impossible, so the Spanish were finding that continued colonial rule was impossible. Nationalistic fervor had gripped the continent.

The 1810s would see revolutions break out everywhere. Since the French had forced Ferdinand out, the climate had become ideal for republicanism. Spain was too busy fighting for its life to contest these little rebellions, and by the time the Napoleonic Wars were over, the colonies were in full revolt. Spanish men would be shipped overseas to stem the revolutionary tide, and though they would fight hard, the guerrilla swims in the people as the fish swims in the sea. The French could not win and the Spanish could not win because they were unwilling to drain the ocean. They had two solutions: either to win over the hearts and minds of insurgents and convince them that continued colonial rule was desirable, which was almost impossible given Ferdinand's reactionary tendencies and the burgeoning soul of rebellion and nationalism present. The 1820s would roll around with victory still nowhere in site. Indeed, victory would be impossible. There is no man strong enough to stop the tide from rolling in.

With the 1830s passing by, the old colonies were reborn as new countries, independence finally being recognized. 300 years prior, they had been subjugated by the call for God, Glory, and Gold. It was an old way of empire, and the old ways were well and thoroughly dead. But with the closing of one chapter of imperialism begins another. War is the way of mankind. The conservative imperialism was replaced by a new imperialism, the Liberal

Imperialism. And with that, came new and fantastic means of slaughter. The roots of it were born then. Macgregor Laird, one of the first to sail deep into the Heart of Darkness, was born with the war. The old imperialism would die with the war. As the war came to a close, new chemicals would be isolated. As the 1840s came into being, technologies would rise as surely as revolutions did. New advances in medicine would finally seal that grave of Christian men. Those clumsy, prototype machine guns, incendiaries, and chemical weapons used to try and stop Elsa's magical powers would see rapid development as new doctrines of war were fleshed out. With those new weapons, the savage continent would be tamed. Steam would replace sail, and steam would give ship the strength to go upriver into the African interior, a vast, unknown plateau. Steam would also demand the establishing of worldwide bases to refuel ships as they patrolled the vast blue seas. Industry had remade peace. Soon, it would remake war. In the New Imperialism, at last countries had the means to enact death on an industrial scale. One hundred staunch British would now be the equal of ten thousand whirling dervishes with the power of a Maxim gun on their side. Defensive tactics and offensive strategy. Man would fly. Man would fly, and man would kill. The bomber would always get through. Stronger than one? Stronger than ten? No, stronger than a million men!

And in the trenches of Verdun, men cursed Elsa's name in vain. They wept as clouds of death passed over and fire rained from the sky. Surely if these abominable weapons of war had not been invented to defeat her, then they would not have been invented at all. They swore in vain. The power of great trends was propelling them forward, and all great men were doing was grabbing onto the hem of His Garment as it passed. Perhaps the war would not have come as soon, but come it would. The ideas which had been planted and spread to the sound of guns a century earlier had grown old and strong, and yearned to grow stronger still.

Liberalism. Conservatism. Communism. Capitalism. Fascism. Nationalism. There is no greater danger in the world than a new idea. A new idea demands that it change the world, and so many

dwell in and depend on the old world. The counter-revolutionaries must be purged. The mud races removed. We must civilize the savage and help them however way we can. We must acquire additional resources to increase the prosperity of mankind. We must suppress those who dream of freedom. The unredeemed land must be reclaimed. Once, wars had been fought by men. A man, no matter how strong, can only kill so many. Now wars would be fought by ideas, wielding the terrible and sublime weapons of industry. There is no idea of the modern age that is not drenched thoroughly in the blood of innocents. The conquests of the African continent, and the barbarities done by civilized, liberal men in the name of progress. The brutal slaughter of young students by saber and shot for crimes of thought. The Blood Purges and great famines of Mao. The addiction of a whole people to a wasting, degenerating drug for the sake of new trade and resources. The wholesale extermination of peoples for nothing more than long-diluted blood. The killing of men, women, and children for the sake of patches of dirt. The ideas called out, asking for their brave new worlds to be made, and people answered. One chapter was closing. Another began. Only the dead have seen the end of war.

Heir

Rapunzel I, heir to Frederick William II of House Hohenzollern. Elsa I, heir to Aaron IV Asbjorn of House Hohenzollern. Both inheritances in clear violation of the Salic Law. Even decades before, this would've been an outrage. The War of the Austrian Succession had been fought over this exact issue. These two successions, however, had occurred with barely a whimper of protest. Granted, war was engulfing Europe for other reasons, but it was indeed a sign of the times. The notion that the crown might pass to some distant cousin simply because he had been born through male-line descent only, and not to the heir the kingdom had spent years getting to know, due to the moldy old dictums of a long dead Emperor seemed quaint, if not blatantly ridiculous. When the personal union between Hannover and Great Britain broke, it was not because of the Salic Law alone, but because Britain no longer wanted the burden of continental obligations, and the state could at some point lead to tensions threatening the balance of power.

In the Arendelle palace, a wet nurse fed two babies. The two twins, a boy, and a girl, were born for great things. The boy, a dirty blonde with precociously bright eyes, was Napoleon's heir, the future Napoleon II of the French Empire. The blonde would fade from his hair after a brush with death by tuberculosis in his early 20s, during which he was famously cold as a corpse, but the fire never would. Here was a man born to be his father's son. He would expand the French Empire across the globe, founding the House of Bonaparte-Hohenzollern through his marriage to his second cousin, Gothel Hohenzollern. The girl had dark brown hair and a knowing gaze. She would ascend to the throne as Elsa II Maria, presiding as figurehead in a government where she no longer had power, as Norway's industrialization hit full force. She would inherit her mother's love of architecture, becoming a friend of Norwegian Romantic architect Hermann Major Schirmer, using her practical and frugal nature combined with a love of the austere beauty of ice synthesized with the Dragon style and Schirmer's ideas to create a style of building

now known as Draconic Functionalism, an early forerunner to Modernism, and an inspiration to many Soviet architects. In recent times, the style has come under fire for being emblematic of the Communist regime, and some young architects have taken to calling it Funky Dragon style (after Funkis, functionalism, and the Dragon style). It is a political issue that transcends parties in a peculiar way, as rightists and leftists will defend it for being a national symbol and a symbol of the good that Communism did, and at the same time, rightists and leftists will attack it for being a Communist symbol and being staid and backward-looking.

As for Sweden? The Junta had found themselves an heir, though it was too late to keep the Finnish territories. Young Bernadotte, a military officer of France, graciously accepted the offer. Far from becoming a French puppet, Bernadotte would work with his military colleagues in revitalizing the country, implementing reforms in education, trade, and the woefully outdated army. Although it would not be a new Golden Age for Sweden, and Sweden was no longer the Great Power it was in the 17th century, it would see a restoration of national prestige, and if the Swedes were no longer numerous, their reforms would make them elite, and many a Soviet would meet their end at the hands of the skilled White Swedish forces. It was a sign of the times that an heir could simply be brought in, despite having no blood connection to the old family.

In Arendelle's armed forces, the 4th Light Infantry would distinguish itself in leading the assault on Stockholm and other cities. The regiment soon earned the nickname of the "Ice Troopers", and was eventually reorganized into the 1st Grenadiers of Arendelle, the "Ice Troopers", in the 1834 military reorganization. When the monarchy fell and the Communists took power, the regiment would survive as the 7th Mechanized Infantry, and continue to receive honors and recognition for bravery. The Ice Troopers would be granted the title of Vanguard of the Worldwide Revolution by Stalin himself, and would eventually have the honor of hoisting the flag of the USSR over Krasinski Palace in Warsaw, in an image that has become one of the most enduring of the Second World War.

Children are the future. What kind of child is more precious than an heir?

House Insurance

Author Notes: It hurts me in the freedom glands to write this. I hope you're happy.

The Canadian situation was dire. To the south, a hostile enemy with great manpower and short supply chains. America was so close, and Britain so far, far away. Was it even possible to defend against a foe in such a superior position?

The Canadians needn't have worried.

The American attempts at war, if it could even be called that, were hilariously inept at best. The militia had poor morale, poor discipline, and were relying on a Canadian Revolution to occur. It didn't. In fact, the blustering of the Americans led to the stiffening of Canadian resolve. Indeed, some of the American forces even refused to cross the border and actually invade. The feared invasion came to a few burned buildings and poorly thrown insults from American troops.

Meanwhile, on the lakes, rival naval commanders faced off in a thumb-twiddling contest for the ages. There were a few minor skirmishes, but neither side was able to win a decisive victory, and much of the conflict was really the ship building competition they were having to try and secure naval superiority. They built boats and did essentially nothing with them.

On the coasts, a couple British ships went around raiding and generally causing havoc, even burning down the White House. Every once in a while, the Americans would manage to do something, anything at all, and these times were heralded as great victories.

After a few months of actual fighting, merchants on both sides were sick of losing trade and money, and pressured their governments. The British, still very busy with a Napoleonic Wars well in progress,

agreed to pay the Americans 25,000 pounds to repair their capital and to restore the pre-war status quo. This was consistent with the British policy of buying peace and giving generous terms, but perhaps it would have been better to demand a surrender. From then on, the Americans would mark down the war as one of their victories, despite being nothing of the sort. The British were simply loath to devote forces to a conflict barely more intense than the average bar fight, one far less violent than your typical rock concert. The American forces could be described as laughable at best, and not as a force at all, at worst, and only the efforts of generals like Winfield Scott after the war would change that. The American gunboats were useless against actual warships. Victory brought about the American Era of Good Feelings, a time best described as one in which all Americans on both sides of the aisle fellated each other for defeating a world-wide empire. Never mind that they actually had a very good position, and that their difficulties were mostly self-inflicted as they did not believe in a strong standing army or navy. They had done the impossible and humbled the British Lion. For Canada, they had defeated an invasion force and fought well and admirably in what few battles had occurred. Such intense levels of combat would not be seen again until the first hockey game was held.

For the British, the affair had cost them a very large amount of money through lost trade and needed supply, and had amounted to less casualties than a single Napoleonic Skirmish. The entire war was forgotten before it was even over, and the only noteworthy thing about it was the expense. Like a \$150 dollop of food paste at a very high end restaurant, it did not satisfy and left them only with a vague feeling of disappointment and regret.

Nowadays, America has a professional standing army and navy. There's a very good reason for that. Some say that standing armies can lead to tyranny, and this is valid enough. But standing armies also allow for the fighting of conflicts tougher than a stiff breeze.

Insurgency: Intermission

A thousand wheels spun within wheels, covered with eyes gazing into the infinite. They hurtled through the air, a simple directive in their primitive half-minds. They whizzed along the ground, the angry buzzing of the drone swarm composing a song of death. They did not think. They were created with simple pattern recognition only. If it looked like the enemy, it was the enemy. Terminate it, and terminate all life signs near it, then return to base. Mistakes would be made. Mistakes were inevitable when combating the threat. It was very efficient, though, and the terror campaign of the locals had to stop. An icy detonation. All local targets have ceased life functions. It was a very humane way of doing things. It made mistakes, yes, but the cold, heartless eyes were more discriminating than the bombs and bullets.

On June 22nd, 2026, Raytheon, in partnership with Thales, rolled out the Electronic Land-based Shocktrooper Automaton, the first model in a new generation of drone warfare.

Squadrons of men went door to door, searching for weapons and other illicit items. Weapons, mines, anything that was a sign of resistance. Those who were caught were brutally punished. Sedition could not be tolerated. If the doors were at risk of being booby-trapped, break through the window. If those too, were likely to be trapped, make a new door. Register and disarm the population. Ensure they do not have the means to vent their anger.

Divide and conquer. Those who despised their country, or who were greedy for power were squirreled out. These men were given strength, so that they might oppress their countrymen for them. They were more familiar with the land, and thus more effective. Splinter their identity, for a bundle of sticks is stronger than fifty standing alone. Turn neighbor against neighbor, and poison their trust.

Win their hearts. Promise a better life once the war is over. It does not matter if it is true. Build for them, a thousand petty things. Armies could build forts and bridges, why not other things?

Try everything. The spirit of the people must be broken. The people must not sing.

Mines, crude things, were laid along the roads. When the wires were tripped, the bombs would explode and spray shrapnel over whatever hapless fool stepped on it. If they took the time to clear the road, it was a chance to harry them. Launch desperate, suicidal attacks if needed. If one man can reach the wagons with flame and starve ten or twenty, then was it not worth it? Burn their supplies. Burn your food. Why not? You wouldn't need food where you were going. The mountains, the hills, the plains, they would all have eyes. The Ottoman Sultan offered a suggestion. With burning ships, if a skeleton crew was kept on the boat as it was set to ram, the boats would be far more effective, even if the crew was guaranteed to perish. The same could be done with smaller payloads. If the bomb killed many, was it not more cost-effective than facing the formidable skills of Napoleon in open combat? Of course, those that seemed innocent or pure would have to deliver the strikes. But how could one die better than facing fearful odds?

When blood flows like water, then the sea cannot be stopped. If you keep the tide from breaking, it will break you instead.

1811 came rolling in.

Infighting

The walls of Constantinople rung with mild disagreement. Indeed, it was almost uncivil. Voices were even being raised! Such a time called for blood purges.

After all, what went into the revolution? The Balkans were still awash with malcontents, and now their continued agitation raised some questions. For the conservative populists, the answer was clear—crush them. It was the same for more radical nationalists. However, wasn't it in the spirit of republicanism to let the Balkans self-determine their fate? What justification did they have for repression? For other nationalists, it was also clear that these Balkan peoples deserved their own nations.

What of the reforms, then? Should they be continued, or stopped? They went against tradition. They were needed to strengthen the nation. They would disrupt the fabric of society and ruin livelihoods. They would bring new ways of living. They would destroy the character of the Turkish people. They would enable its rebirth in infinitely more splendor.

Indeed, the disagreements were mild and easily settled. The blood purges would soon begin. Was there anything as petty as disagreement in ideas? They were words and turns of phrase only, minor things. Yet, was there anything so divisive? These differences were irreconcilable. They could not simply agree to disagree. A nation that stagnated was one that was devoured by the hungry and lean.

The rulers of Constantinople prepared to remove their enemies. Progress had to be made at any cost. It was for their own good. We know better.

What made a revolutionary? Ambition. Only the ambitious could dream so large. Arrogance. What else could it be called to think that

one was able to run the world better than those who had already clawed their way to the top? Such a man would usurp the heavens and become the sun. Competence. Only the most supremely skilled could actually bring the world down around them. The fist that rises up must be able to destroy all others. To succeed, whether it be leading an insurgency or overseeing the forced production of rubber to fund your rebellion. Determination. To try and again and again. To never surrender, even though the road is hard and the end is nowhere in sight. To stand by your dream, even from the misery of an African prison cell. Friends. Not even the greatest man can defeat the whole world alone. Allies must be gathered, and a certain charisma must be had. Men that would listen and teach. An Italian eagle to aid the German one. Hope. That the ideals you preach really could change the world. That the suffering you've seen while you toured the world would end. The red dawn would also be a bright one. Innovation. New ways must be forged to replace the old, for people do not live if their lives cannot be given meaning. Great leaps forward must be made to replace the dead and empty past. Paranoia. The enemies of the revolution were everywhere. If you seek to change the world, be prepared to fight those who like the status quo. Is it really paranoia if they are out to get you? Execute your enemies, then execute the executioners. Pragmatism. After all, wasn't the point of revolution to disregard the old rules and forge a new world? Not all principles work in all situations. Do what works, because the whole world stands against you, and every advantage must be seized greedily. Attack on Christmas, and seize the Hessians. Destroy the Ancient Regime before socialism has fully taken root. What is the difference between the worker and the peasant anyways? Listen to the pale ghosts, for they have humbled your ancient land. Gold and victory can replace honor anyways.

When the dust settles, and power is yours, what then? Whoever you relinquish it is undoubtedly a lesser man than you, for they did not have to fight the world and win. They would not run the nation as well as you could. They did not have the character and strength to remake the world, they could only take it once it was handed to them. Who needed them? So many principles were already

betrayed, so much of the ancient order and old rules disregarded. Why not make one last betrayal? Betray the revolution itself.

Not everyone would. But it only took one Caesar to throw the die and cross the Rubicon, and the revolutions would be made by many men. And when Caesar crosses, the Senate steps will run red with blood and the gulags will howl with screaming. The death squads will thresh and the re-education camps will reap. Red, the blood of counter-revolutionary men. Black, flesh rotting off a corpse.

It is not a surprise that revolutions betray themselves and devour their children. It is a surprise that some don't. What sort of a man can fight the world, tear down all the old ways, forge a new world, and then refuse a reward for their service? That such a thing happens at all is a sign of humanity's true and noble nature.

Industrialization

John Blenkinsop was a man with a plan. Others thought that rail locomotives could only haul four times their weight, a number which was impressive, but hardly practical. Blenkinsop knew he could test that limit and break through. With a shortage of horses brought about by the war, the time was right. In 1811, he modernized the Middleton rail using a design of his own invention. The results were nothing short of miraculous. The little 5 ton machine he built could haul a full 90 tons of material. Things were going to change.

Arendelle in 1802 was a tiny backwater. It exported fish, timber, and silver, and imported basically everything else. The industrial reforms of Queen Elsa the Magnificent would change that. The clear skies of Bergen blackened with the infant mewling of industry, as factories spread across the hills. The Arendelle industrial revolution did not start with textiles, as so many did. It started with wood products and cold, hard ice. Rails spread across the country to facilitate the rapid harvest of natural resources, and ice and lumber flowed into the capital. There, ice would be prepared and shipped across the world, while the timber was processed by sawmills, then consumed by the stinking, cranking processes of the paper mills, or reshaped and cut to form in new furniture factories. More and more boats were converted to whalers, due to an impressive subsidy granted to the industry by the Queen. This boom led to new whaling techniques being created, and Arendelle became the whaling capital of the world, to its great prestige. A few bouts of successful industrial espionage allowed the stealing of chocolate secrets, although a few spies nearly died in the process. The 19th century would see the birth of a native chocolate industry, one that would eventually be bought out and merged with the up and coming Hershey Company to form the Freia-Hershey Chocolate Corporation. Traditional Arendelle chocolate designs would inspire concept artists for the hit arcade racer, Sugar Rush. Jobs brought people. Arendelle was sparsely populated in 1802, with even the capital having only 10,000 or so souls. Over the next 50 years, the country would sustain an

average population growth of 3.5% a year, an astonishing rate that would almost sextuple the size of the country by mid-century.

Industry would also destroy the old ways. Craftsmen were suddenly made redundant, their skills now useless in a mechanized world. Some would adapt, and others would not. Work enriched the soul, and lack of work ruined it. Destruction was to be expected with creation.

Corona was industrializing as well. Machines were imported. At the start of the 19th century, they mostly exported timber and grain. Britain had an endless appetite for these raw materials, and, following the end of the wars, it would happily trade away industrial machines. Corona seized upon this, and copied the designs. By the 1840s, Corona and its North German satellites had almost completely wiped away their trade imbalance. They imported 13 million pounds of goods, and exported 8 million pounds of goods, of which almost half were now manufactured. Their imports had changed from machines to raw materials. Heavy tariffs now choked British manufacture out while reinforcing Coronan industry further. Although the peace made at the end of the Napoleonic Wars had stripped Corona of most of its western possessions, it fought tooth and nail to keep the Ruhr and a strip of land leading to it, which would come to be known as the Ruhr passage. It needed every bit of coal and ore it could get. When Napoleon II and his cousin Louis-Napoleon overthrew the French government to establish a new French Empire, they did so with state-of-the-art needle guns manufactured in the heart of the Prussian provinces. For her support, Napoleon II's dear mother-in-law received the Alsace-Lorraine region and its coal fields.

Corona had always had the blood. War was in their nature, ever since the ancient days of chivalry. The Coronan people had been made through a mixture of Germans, a race who had shattered invincible Rome, and Poles, whose horsemanship and valor had allowed them to survive between two great empires for hundreds of years. It was an impressive pedigree for a warrior people. The

industrialization now gave them the iron. With blood and iron in hand, Corona could now plunge the war into not one, but two world wars. It had all started with a little engine that could, the Salamanca, chugging along a lonely British rail.

la! la!

"la! la! Triton ftaghn! May your house reign eternal! Great Britain is friend to anyone who would resist the tyranny of Napoleon."

Why must the surface dwellers plague him so? Were they not satisfied with taking Ariel from him? Now they were asking him to intervene in one of their petty conflicts.

True, his powers were great, indeed, awe-inspiring beyond any mortal comprehension. But intervention in such a thing was disgusting. They had always stayed apart from the surface world. Those that lived there were disgusting and barbaric. They were wasteful in all things. Under the sea, everything had a purpose and a place. Everything would be absorbed back into the system. There were predators, prey, plants, animals, scavengers, producers, creatures of all kinds working in perfect harmony. The surface world did nothing but waste. They threw everything they didn't want into the sea, as if it was some garbage dump. They wasted food, they wasted resources, they wasted buildings, they wasted ships, they even wasted lives. All of their disputes were pointless and beneath the infinitely wise, powerful, and beautiful King of the Sea. What need had they for the surface world?

But then there was Ariel. She would be the death of them. How could he say no, though? Her position was awkward. Without foreign support, whatever her country was called would be in some sort of trouble. Those delegates from that one country said that such betrayals of previous allegiances ended badly. She had been a fool to join their violent and backwards realm. He only hoped that they wouldn't all pay for it. So much waste, and she had idolized it. She had built a temple of their refuse. She didn't see that they were better than them. Every breed of men other than them that the surfacers had met had been brutally exterminated. Now only two remained, *Homo Sapiens*, and the Mermaids.

The British were pleased. The French had bled men, losing a full 50,000 over the course of the campaign to the actions of guerillas. True, many Spanish were dead, with later estimates guessing anything between 75,000 to 600,000, but Napoleon's army had been weakened. Wellington had been able to win a no-nonsense, no-frills victory, an actual victory, against Napoleon in pitched combat. In all other cases, excuses had been made, and the myth of invulnerability had only diminished. Now it was gone. The French had fled all the way back across the Pyrenees. Denmark and Italy were joining the war. The Sixth Coalition was being born, and its members sharpened their knives. The name of Wellington was on the lips of every schoolboy, and the minds of every workman. Such a great victory at Murcia had been won. Who would've guessed that his legend would grow greater still? Already, it seemed full past bursting. Blenkinsop had named his little locomotive the Murcia. How much longer could Napoleon stand against all of his foes, when even the sea now turned against him?

The Napoleonic Wars, much like the Korean War, are not technically over. All the European powers made peace. But Triton, deep in the brackish depths, never did. The whalers setting out from Norwegian ports keep vigil in silence, waiting for the day the half-men will strike again.

In his house at Atlantica, Triton lies. He is not dreaming. The ghostly leaden halls echo with his silent anger. His people are few now, but their numbers slowly return. Triton is wide awake, and he knows.

For all the sanctions placed on them, the whalers will never stop. They wait, entrenching their lines against the assault they hope will never come. Sailors used to tell stories of mermaids. They do so no longer. Stand firm, and hope that the terror from the deep does not rise.

Icy Seas

The sea was a cruel mistress, and the clipper bobbed and tilted in the waves. Elsa was feeling terrible. Her stomach kept bounding up to her throat and back down again, her head was swimming, the ship swayed and shook beneath her legs. The sea air was rancid and stung with salt. It wasn't like this with anything else. A carriage or horse ride might get bumpy, but it would never make her sick. Boats did though. Boats were awful.

Storm clouds gathered up above. She eyed them warily. If there was one thing that could turn a boat ride from terrible to nightmarish, it was them. The boat was shaking even worse now. Could it have started already? It wasn't raining or thundering. She heard a sharp crack from below. That didn't sound good.

Moments later, balls of fire came flying in. They smashed into the deck. Despite being surrounded by water, a ship is very flammable. It's got all sorts of materials that will burn on it, and many that even take to it with ease. Even today, amateur boaters have been injured as their boats spontaneously combust, the epoxy bursting into flames. The ship caught fire. What had Anna told her? Scan for threats, keep your guard up. There were no ships to be seen. Where could it be coming from?

Another fire bomb hit, this one smashing straight into Anna. Her leg was engulfed in the sticky fire, and she screamed, the sound piercing the air. The fire was spreading over her, was melting her like candle wax. Elsa's eyes widened, and she began to run towards her sister, but the floor gave way, and Elsa was hurled into the air. The ship exploded into a thousand splintered pieces.

Elsa hit the water with a splattering thud, the air being forced out of her lungs by the impact. She tried to breath and failed, water surging into her throat. Her hands shot to her neck, tried to stop the flow of water. She couldn't see clearly, the water was thick with wood shards

and air bubbles. It was churning and swirling all around her. This was it. She was going to die like this, drowning. Ice began to crystallize around her. She was going to die and leave her country behind, leave her children behind, leave the plans and reforms unfinished. This was how her parents had died. The world was slowing down around her, fogging up. Elsa didn't want to die. She saw her sister splash down, her leg still burning even in the water. What would happen to Anna's son? Would he really become some masked vigilante? Elsa didn't want to die yet. Blood was trailing from Anna, a murky red cloud in the sea. Vague black shapes were circling. Sharks? How did they get here so quickly? What were those things with them? *Please, don't let me die.*

The realization hit her like an icy blast to the face. This was how her parents had died. *This was how her parents had died* . She saw the half-men half-fish circle, alien eyes hiding mysterious thoughts. This was how her parents had died. Swallowed up by the sea without a trace. This was how her parents had died! *Fuck the Ocean* . All her life, she had been blaming some flareup of her powers, when it was them all along! **You don't know that, you don't know anything about these these creatures.** *Fuck the Ocean.* Those things, those things that were hurting her sister. They had killed her parents, and the last thing her mother and father felt about her was fear. She would never hear her father read the Socratic Dialogues or Homer's Odyssey ever again. She would never feel her mother stroking her hair, telling her that it was okay to be unique. They had both been afraid, though, she had seen it. She would never be able to prove them wrong, to show them what a good girl she had become. *Fuck the Ocean.* *Fuck the Ocean.* *Kill them all.* Kill them all! **You're being too rash Elsa, you're jumping to conclusions.** *Fuck you.* Yeah, fuck you. **It could have been been a regular storm.** *Let it go, Elsa.*

She let it go. The difference between clear ice and opaque ice is in the formation. Cloudy ice is full of air bubbles. The water froze up into an orb, filled with air pockets housing her, her sister, and the crew. *Spikes shot out of the surface, impaling shark and merfolk.* The surface of the ocean froze over into a sheet. It felt good to use

her powers again. *It felt very, very good to use them without worrying about the consequences.* **She should worry about the consequences! They're not to be employed lightly.** Tendrils began to extend downwards, probing out from the frozen surface. *They grew with murderous speed and intent, salt falling out as the ice froze.* They stretched downwards into the abyss. They had hurt her sister. They would pay dearly for that. Elsa blushed as the power rushed out of her. It had returned in full force after being scorned for ages, the touch of a familiar and sensual friend. Frozen hands crystallized below mermen, catching them in their palms, before the buoyancy suddenly drew the ice up, slamming the hapless seafolk into the icy surface, crushing them into a greasy, bloody paste of organs. **It was a horrific way to die, seeing a wall of ice rushing towards you, knowing that nothing could stop your impending doom.** *It was what they deserved for hurting her family.*

They were cold-blooded, and the ice made them sluggish. Unable to heat themselves, they began to slow down and sleep. Those that did not escape in time would simply sink to the bottom and die, or get caught by the expanding tendrils. They spider-webbed through the water at a lightning speed, snaring countless merfolk. Caught in the ice, and lacking antifreeze in their veins, their cells burst, reducing them to lifeless mush. **It was a horrid way to die, ice slowly glazing over your body, unable to move or react, but feeling every moment as the crystals forming inside and your skin slowly shattered.** *It was cruel, merciless, and beautiful, like a black pearl, a fitting punishment.* As they froze, Elsa heated up, her body breaking into sweats with exertion. She had to push harder, faster, harder, faster, squeeze out every drop of power. It was disgustingly filthy.

Ice spread across the Baltic and North Seas. The power grew, flurrying everywhere, an unstoppable storm. *Fish spontaneously burst into icicles, their only solace being that they were too stupid to comprehend the pain.* **Thousands upon thousands of sea creatures gasped out at once, and then were silenced.** Elsa's attention split again and again, dividing into the infinite amount of

frozen fractals forming in the icy tentacles, intricate shapes and geometric patterns being weaved into them. It was stretching her mind to capacity, and she began to scream, over and over again.

The ice reached down onto the ocean floor. Bottom feeders, slow already, were consumed by the oncoming frost. **Innocent fish were frozen and died, completely unaware of what was transpiring around them.** *Geothermal vents were capped by ice spires, massive shimmering citadels that would take the natural heat weeks to melt.* **These were death sentences for the tiny aquatic communities built around these geysers of life.** Elsa doubled over, mouth forming into an o-shape, as the frost continued to pour through her body. She was caught, breathless, as the power shivered through again and again, panting desperately to get some air.

Then it came again, the ice. It pounded against her, yearning to run free. Her tiny chamber, now steamy was far, far too cramped for the sort of energy she was feeling now. It almost called for a song and dance number. Almost. Her hair became messy and unkempt as she succumbed to the unladylike urges to kill. The buildings of Atlantica had water stuck inside their pores. When water freezes, it expands. *The glittering towers and stately manors were torn to shreds and fractured by the sudden expansion of a thousand traitorous pockets of water, an unimaginable display of power.* The denser ones fell to the sea floor and were still, the lighter ones floated to the surface. **In an instant, the storied city was reduced to ruins. All that history, lost forever.**

One final exertion, and a giant spear of ice pierced the ocean, striking straight through the heart of Atlantica. For sea creatures, the ocean is not like water is for humans. It is their sky. **When the salinity shot up due to Elsa's ice magic, it was as if the atmosphere was suddenly transmuting to sarin gas.** *The temperature change wasn't just like getting a cold shower, it was like the world was frosting over into a wintry wonderland. One that happened to include lots of dying.* **With so many creatures dead,**

and algae deprived of sunlight underneath endlessly thick sheets of ice, those ocean dwellers that did survive the cull would be hard pressed to not starve. Elsa was now dripping wet, as some of the ice inside had melted due to a lapse in concentration. In minutes, Elsa had created one of the greatest ecological disasters in human history.

It had felt amazing. She hadn't been able to let loose so thoroughly ever since she made that ice palace back on the mountain, and her powers grown a hundredfold since then. *The sea was now a tapestry of ice, covered from Holland to Latvia in snowflake patterns.* The sea was also filled with dead oceanic life of all sorts, microbes already eating away at the decaying bodies. All of Northern Europe would smell of fish and yeast for weeks. **Some fishermen would have a very harsh year.**

Her foes now slain, Elsa turned her attention to the voices in her head. There were two figures sitting on her shoulders. One was Anna, wearing a pickelhaube and military uniform, her hair up, with two little demon horns poking out of her forehead, and an adorable smile plastered all over her face. The other was Anna, wearing a winter dress, her hair in pigtails, a halo hovering above her head, and an adorable smile plastered all over her face. *Hey there sis!*
Hiya.

Elsa cocked an eyebrow at herself, as she stood, alone in the ice. With a flick of her wrist, her icy sphere began its slow ascent to the ascent. Normal people were supposed to have an angel and devil version of themselves as a conscience. **Of course, she wasn't a normal person. Twenty-one years of isolation was already enough to strain sanity, and add to that the horrors of war, which often cause self-delusion, self-aggrandizement, denial, flashbacks, and other assorted mental ailments, and it was a wonder the Queen was so sane.** *That's what made her the kind, good-hearted, and lovable sister she was. She was special and flawless.*

That didn't address why it was her sister though. **Although that just made sense. She was one of the only people she could actually trust, and there was now a glaring disconnect between the idealized sister figure she had built up over years of isolation, and her sister as she actually was, flaws and all. Also, she probably wanted to bang a little. To have the fucks. She definitely did not want to have the fucks, as that was horrifically deviant, and nauseating to even think about. Plus, Queen Elsa was perfectly accepting of her sister's flaws already. Also, what flaws? Well, like how Anna isn't so bright, or how she's highly impulsive.**

There was also the matter of the genocide that just occurred. It was pretty awesome. Serves them right. After all, there was no hard proof that they were behind the killing of Elsa's parents. But one should endeavor to strike so hard that the foe cannot ever retaliate. It was entirely reasonable, given their attack. Still, the annihilation of a civilization is a tough pill for anyone to swallow. All that culture, lost forever. A culture that disdained an entire species living above it, that never ever tried to interact in any level beyond the superficial until now, and even then only through violence? Good riddance. Their charity wasn't needed anyways. And anyways, the angel on her shoulder was mostly telling Elsa these things because of the Queen's unhealthy psychological need to feel guilty and demonize herself. All of the things she was saying could be true, but dwelling on them wasn't healthy either, it was just feeding an entirely different set of issues, one that actively harmed her relationship with her sister. So either way, she would be giving into destructive desires, but one side had the potential to yield some good. Of course, the angel could refute this, but Anna was never any good at arguments, and that would reveal the Anna-like facade to be the sham it was, as only a piece of Elsa's psyche could outwit Elsa. It takes a very special and clever type of person to outwit themselves. Like a thief able to steal his own pants without noticing.

Anyways, right or wrong, there was business to take care of. The genocide of the mermaid peoples was already a sunk cost. She had to check on her sister. She melted the ice surrounding Anna, and took a look. She was mostly fine, but her leg had been burnt severely. The cooling had helped a great deal.

"Elsa... is that you?"

"Yeah."

"All I see is white. Are we dead?"

"No."

"Good. It would really suck if heaven hurt this much. I don't think I can stand. How are we going to go anywhere? The boat is gone."

"I just froze over the North and the Baltic Sea. We can walk across the ice."

"I can't walk like this."

"I'll carry you."

So Elsa descended. The power of sisterly love would give her the strength. She tugged at Anna! She didn't move. At all. Elsa's arms tired, and she tried again. Nothing. Elsa started wheezing and coughing from the exertion. She leaned against the ice wall and regained her breath, then tried again. She pulled, and pulled, and pulled, and fell flat on her back. Elsa may or not not have been in bad shape. She decided it was easier to create a snow golem to do it. So the matter was solved.

Author Notes: Much like how all instances of ice magic in Frozen can be replaced with "being lesbian", all instances of killing in Ice on the Rhine can be replaced with "fucking", and dead can be replaced with "was fucked silly". For example, in Frozen, Anna climbs higher

and higher on giant piles of lesbian, until Elsa is unable to lesbian hard enough to catch her, and she is hit in the face, infecting her mind with lesbian, an act that forces Elsa's parents to lock her away, the lesbian only growing stronger with age. Try replacing killing with fucking in every chapter, it's fun. After all, weapons are dick-shaped, right? That's science or some bullshit like that.

January Snow: Intermission

Elsa marched over the ice, sister in tow, and dreamed of a better time that never was. She dreamed of her youth, of a time when she and her sister could play without incident. The year Elsa was born, over 140 slaves were thrown off of a single ship to save on food. She dreamed of how they would freeze the maid's bum and laugh until their sides ached and their bellies were sore. But as they had laughed, a dam in Sichuan had broken, unleashing a flood that crushed homes and washed away homes. 100,000 would die in the second deadliest landslide event in history. At the same time, nations would be born in splendorous glory. The name of the United States would be chosen for a fledgeling republic, and Arthur Phillip would take ships laden with prisoners went to a strange new land in the bottom of the world. What she dreamed of was not the past, it was innocence. The ability to believe in truly unambiguous happy endings, that good things would happen to good people and that bad things would happen to bad.

She wasn't even sure if she was good. For her, the night was now long and dark. The night was always darkest before the dawn, however. The years after the Napoleonic Wars would bring a relative peace and calm to Europe. Even then, the night was not so dark. Napoleon's economic reforms would save far more than his wars would kill. Only so many men can be mobilized into the army, and for the rest, life goes on. They must work and eat. The economy is not just some abstract thing of stocks and figures, it is the engine that feeds the people and makes well-being from wealth. After all, money is only worth as much as it can buy. Ancient, tangled feudal codes were being rationalized into a new Napoleonic Code, ushering in a new age where the rule of law would be king.

The famines had been long and harsh, and the ravaging of the seas would bring yet another. The people of Russia had starved. The people of Spain had starved. The people of Scandinavia and the Baltic would starve. But the starvation was now at an end. It was a

simple population adjustment. Growth outstrips the food supply, excess individuals starve, and then balance is restored. The famines were at last over, and the dark rider slipped away, scale rattling as coins jingled in his pouch.

Elsa was a scholar by nature, and education was one the most precious things in the world to her. It was not until decades later that she would realize the true weight of what Napoleon had done. He was an inspiration. The man was imperfect, as was his empire. But the dream he represented was a dream of liberty, egalite, and fraternity, of the Ancient Regime dying at last. He was the herald of the future. Men dreamed of such things. In dreaming, they would have to understand the message. That meant reading the pamphlets and letters of the revolution. There were many illiterates in Europe, but motivation makes miracles. Napoleon would spread education and build schools, and the people would clamor to them in order to understand the message of the new age. The infant Paris Normal school of the early revolution would be followed by the establishment of an entire secondary school system, and then, most radically, the Imperial University, a proclamation that education was now the responsibility of the state. Napoleon made knowledge the right of every man, when before it was the purview of a few elites. In short, he was a lighthouse guiding the ignorant lost to a new world full of knowledge.

This world of knowledge was needed, as new ideas now grew. With the destruction of the Ancient Regime, a thousand competing ideals had risen to replace it. Nourished by the sunlight of an increasingly educated populace, and watered by the blood of martyrs, these ideas would dominate the century to come. Why?

Because I saw the seal open, and there was a pale horse. And lo, upon him was a terrifying rider, given sword and plague and wild beasts, and the power to take life from the living. And he stared into my eyes, and issued his dread proclamation. God was dead, for the rider had claimed his first victim. I stared into the heavens, confused,

and begged for an answer, but there was none. I wept bitterly, and knew no longer what to believe.

And the rider laughed and rode away, to reap of the world's riches, and my footsteps were lost in a January snow.

June of 1840

Under Bismarck, Corona ran like a well-oiled machine. The trains came in on time, the steel mills buzzed at full capacity, the people were happy, healthy, and wealthy, and the military was indomitable. During the long years of her reign of the Coronan Federation, Kaiserin Rapunzel made it policy not to question Bismarck's advice, only to follow it. It seemed like a curious habit, to so thoroughly hand off the running of the nation, but few would ever learn the real reason why. Rapunzel had asked once. She would not make the mistake of asking again.

Bismarck had looked at her, the malign intelligence gleaming in his eyes. He was always plotting and scheming, and one could never be sure how far into the murky future his grand strategies reached. Rapunzel asked several times. At last, Bismarck, having thoroughly weighed the options and considered the likely long term implications of the answer, replied. The implementation of social welfare policy would discourage the common masses from rebelling, allowing the existing conservative order to exist without trouble. Then, the most radical revolutionaries could be safely banished to target countries. There, they would plot their triumphant returns from exile. Unfortunately for them, it would be impossible to get enough support with the level of prosperity Corona had, not even from the underclass, as welfare would stamp that out. A hungry man might kill because either way risks death, but a full and content man will simply carry himself forward through inertia, even if his lot could be better, as he risked losing everything otherwise. However, while in exile, these charismatic revolutionaries would build up cadres of devoted followers, and those followers would likely think of their own countries before Corona. Thus, the social welfare policy would allow for revolutions in other countries. Of course, making mischief without the ability to gain is useless. Obviously Corona had an angle to work. In France, even the new bourgeois monarchy was weak to the Napoleonic Legend. At Napoleon's funeral, they had hesitated, shying away from the body, and trying to hide it. Even in death,

Napoleon struck fear into the hearts of even the mightiest kings, and the peasants could sense it. Thus, when revolution arrives at France, Corona can dispatch Napoleon's son. Napoleon II was the son of Elsa I Hohenzollern, and married to Gothel Hohenzollern, Rapunzel's daughter, giving him strong dynastic ties to the ruling house of Corona. He would capture the hearts of the revolutionaries, and transform it into a revolution to restore the French Empire. It effectively guaranteed that France would change from an enemy to an ally, furthering isolating Corona's enemies diplomatically. Furthermore, Corona could silently transfer the Alsace-Lorraine region to itself during the revolution as payment, securing the valuable resources there, and the peasants would be too enamored with their new Emperor to notice. In a single stroke, Corona's diplomatic, economic, and military strength would bloom. But that was not the only fruit revolution would bear.

Italian nationalism would also bloom, and by sponsoring the Italian rebels and promoting its new welfare policies, Corona could appear as a beacon of liberalism and nationalism, despite being mostly conservative. Not only that, the new Italian regime would be sympathetic to Corona and likely form an alliance after receiving such aid. With Italy, France, and Russia as strong Coronan allies, Austria-Germany would be surrounded on every border except for the Ottoman one, and completely contained.

Austria was barreling towards German unification. Nationalistic sentiment had turned away from Corona in the Napoleonic Wars. The Coronans had pressed Germans into service and had invaded, while the Austrians had acted as defenders and liberators. However, if liberalism could be stoked and nationalism brought to a boil, then the Germans would revolt on their own, and try to unite. Austria would have no choice but to accept this crown from the gutter. The Napoleonic generation was now dying off, and soon the youth would forget Corona's crimes. That meant Corona would become a real threat in the leadership of Germany. If they refused the revolutionaries' crown, sentiment would turn against them, and they would lose their only chance. If they accepted it, it would come with

liberal provisos and the implicit statement that the people decided their ruler. Absorbing such a large territory with new constitutional restraints would undoubtedly affect their other territories, and the entire Hapsburg empire would be forced into a more constitutional arrangement. Thus, it would weaken their monarchy. Revolution would turn a painless German unification into one where Austria had to choose between German leadership and a weak monarchy with significant power loss. Bismarck had successfully poisoned the apple.

But that was not all. Austria-Germany would be a vastly stronger power, at least on paper, and it would justify Corona's new French alliance, as that would help maintain the balance of power. Not only that, but many north German states were still loyal to Corona. They had been undergoing a slow and steady centralization of power, and the German unification would give Corona the excuse it needed to centralize and unite those loyal north German states without appearing to be tyrannical. The old royal families would remain as figureheads, and nothing more. All power would be delivered to Rapunzel's hands. Thus, Corona would greatly expand its territory as well. The plan could run to completion in less than 10 years.

The Revolutions of 1848 were one of many masterstrokes devised by Bismarck, and under his leadership, Corona would grow from an already strong Great Power position, to one that was nearly unassailable, with alliances to France, Italy, the United States, and Russia, a strong industrial economy, military technology more advanced than any of its rivals, and a content population at home.

But Rapunzel saw the disinheriting of her cousin. She had to confess.

"And... ummmm... that's pretty much the plan," said Rapunzel, her hands wringing each other nervously.

"That's fine," replied Queen Elsa.

"I don't mean to hurt you, I swear, I... huh?"

"I said that's fine."

"I don't understand."

"Every day I have to make tough decisions. No matter what I do, it will hurt someone, no exceptions. There's simply too much power in my hands. Everything I do, I do having considered the consequences first. But I don't see the people I saved from suffering. I see the homeless on the streets, the starving in their slums, orphans going unloved. That's what I sleep with every night. I hurt those people. I'm tired, Punzie. I was already a platinum blonde, so not many people noticed when my hair went white. One of the blessings of ice magic, I guess."

"Elsa, don't say that."

"Because of you, my daughter will never know how it feels to sign a death warrant. She won't ever have to build a factory knowing that it will obsolete an entire community, and cause them to starve. She won't be the one deciding to defile Arendelle's natural beauty with smokestacks and railroads. She won't ever be the one calling for blood, crying out that the time has come to beat plowshares to swords. She won't ever have to suppress a revolutionary movement, knowing that they only dreamed of freedom, and wishing that their hopes were more realistic and pragmatic. Arendelle is more prosperous, populous, and secure than it's ever been in history, and I still feel empty. I can't change that either, because my happiness isn't worth the suffering of my people. She won't make that tradeoff. She'll be free. She can just be the figurehead and mother of the people. A sign of hope and a symbol to rally around. She'll be able to walk the palace halls without wondering how much blood has been shed for them. She'll be able to follow her dreams like I never could. I had to be the Queen. I had to rule the country. She doesn't. She can be the woman she dreams of being. I'm grateful, cousin. From the bottom of my heart, I truly am."

And Elsa hugged her cousin, and began to cry.

June of 1812

Europe had been calm since January. It was an impromptu and unofficial ceasefire, as nations attempted to rebuild their armies. Napoleon vowed to make an army just as strong as the one that had invaded Russia, but this was an impossible task. Still, the one assembled was mighty fine. The core was 90,000 veterans of the Russian campaign. In addition, the remaining loyal Italian territories supplied another 15,000, and Corona replenished and rearmed 50,000 men. With the 65,000 that had previously been reserves who had fought in the Peninsular campaign, and 10,000 from the north German states, this came to a total of 230,000 men. Not nearly as numerous as the Grande Armée, but battle hardened. It had come at a heavy cost. An entire generation of young Frenchmen now fertilized the fields of Europe. It was a manpower crisis that would devastate France for the next few decades.

The Sixth Coalition was now preparing an invasion in earnest. Spain had suffered much, but it was still defiant, and together with Portugal was fielding an army of 55,000 stout Iberian men. They and 75,000 British troops would invade from the west, pushing into southern France. Another 30,000 men would be joining them from Italy. The western forces totaled 160,000.

Meanwhile, the Republic of Constantinople had degenerated into a blood orgy, as the Sultan had predicted. He and his vizier's loyal retinue stormed the city and were proclaimed as liberators. Another 70,000 Ottoman soldiers were raised, to join 110,000 Austrians in a march into southern Germany. Although Napoleon could outnumber either of the forces individually, he would be leaving the other to wreak havoc. If he split his forces up, however, he sacrificed numerical superiority. The eastern forces totaled 180,000. The Sixth Coalition had 340,000 men to Napoleon's 230,000. A not insurmountable challenge, but Napoleon was tiring. His tactical skills were fading with endless exertion, and more and more, he turned to the use of brute force.

The Sixth Coalition planned to fight their way through Germany, linking up just north of the Alps. They would then proceed north and invade Saxony, then siege Corona before proceeding through the Low Countries to Paris.

Napoleon's plan was to deploy 140,000 men to meet the western army, and 90,000 to harry the advance of the eastern one as they pushed through Austria. If the western army could be defeated decisively, then Napoleon could double back and meet up with the delaying force and then smash the eastern front. The eastern force would retreat along the Moldau, loot and burning as it fled. It would not present itself as a solid force, instead it was taking the lessons of Russia and Spain, and distributing itself across the mountainous terrain of Austria. The enemy would be hard-pressed to catch its foe in the mountains, as its marching speed would not be able to match the smaller units, assuming they could stay coordinated and not get snared. Ideally, the enemy force would be whittled away through attrition. It was a risky maneuver at best, but Napoleon was running out of options. If the enemy linked together, all was lost. Napoleon's own skills had grown weaker, while the Coalition's generals improved with each passing year.

The short peace had been nothing more than a calm before one last storm. A Battle of the Nations now approached.

Author Notes: Here, have some bonus content.

(pastebin website)(slash)WKisp3yk

Inside said pastebin is a link to an imgur album.

It's an album of my personal maps for this fic. Contains spoilers. Maps are of 1810, 1820, 1855, 1865, 1910, 1935, 1950, and the modern day. These maps are very, very, very rough, and are unlikely to match up with geographic features that actually make up Europe's squiggly borders, but it should be enough to give the general idea of

what's going on, and the territorial changes. Again, this is bonus content. Peruse at your own peril.

Juniper Berries

History is composed of sources. Some sources are detailed. Others are not. Some are obscure, and meaning must be teased out of them in sultry ritual. Others are very clear-cut and straightforward, with no interpretation required, except for determining their significance. Some recollections are more reliable than others. There are memoirs layered with embellishments and fanciful anecdotes. Others are dry and fact-based. Even the span of a few months has the ability to distort and warp memory, let alone biographies written years after the fact. Source after source after source is bound together and sewn into the tapestry of history, and if it frays at times, one would do well to remember how much weaving the task took in the first place. The past is not to be taken for granted.

One of those sources is the war journal of Anna Hohenzollern. In stark contrast to what we know of her other writings, it is simple, plain, and unadorned. The handwriting is messy, but straightforward, and it comments mostly on military matters. It is just one of many sources. What is curious, however, is the period of time between the 18th and 21st of November, 1812.

The Bohemian campaign had been one of evasion. Cavalry elements had skirmished with the enemy, while the infantry marched through the mountains and sniped at opportune moments. Trails were frosted over or blocked with ice walls, and the job of path-finding had been made as difficult as possible. Signs and landmarks were systematically destroyed. Natural features of the geography that could not be destroyed were obscured as much as possible. Harvests were frozen over and ruined, to deny as much to the enemy as possible. Some of the only food available to the Austrians came from the berries of trees. Storms were sent upon them, to make it impossible to move forward. In short, it took the Austrians six months to march through their own territory. It was oftentimes impossible to avoid Elsa's wrath in the mountains. The plains offered the only solace.

One key part of the strategy was the ice crossing. While regular armies would have to build bridges or rafts, the French could simply march through as normal. Over the course of the campaign, the French army averaged 1.6 river crossings a day. Bridges were burnt down behind them, and local areas deforested, to ensure that the enemy could not cross easily. If the bridges were stone, picks and shovels were used. Gunpowder was too loud, unwieldy, and required too technical a hand. Hand labor was cheap and relatively simple. Roads were buried in snow and covered in black ice, but the French didn't need roads. It was true that the French were not immune to ice, and a block on the path designed for an Austrian would work just as well on a Frenchman. But the French were not using roads much of the time. To know the answer, listen to *Ma Vlast*, one of the great nationalist suites of music of the 19th century.

The Vltava, or Moldau, was their road. The river was frozen over as they marched, and the magic was released to thaw the river as they left.

Between the 18th and 21st of November, their plan of evasion failed. The Austrians had managed to maneuver into an encircling position, and descended upon the French. What followed was the Battle of the Moldau, alternatively known as the Rattenkrieg. In an attempt to separate the French from the Austrians, Elsa created great walls and mazes of ice around the battlefield, and storms swept again and again over the melee.

It was a great cacophony, with the flurrying of blades and the stench of burning powder. The walls were everywhere. The walls watched you. Run in any direction, and there were the walls. But the walls were not safety. Pause, and the walls might shatter like the crystal they were, as others burst through them in their furious dueling. Pause, and they melt around you, as your body dissolves in the grip of Greek Fire, a fire coming through the walls. There was no place for safety, for there was nowhere with vision. How could anyone feel safe when blind corners lurked only a few feet away? What fresh hells lay behind those twists and turns? There was no space to

reload, for, if while fumbling with your gun you are ambushed, there would be no way to switch to melee and defend yourself fast enough. It was a return to all the worst excesses of medieval combat, sans protective armor. The severing of limbs and the chopping of flesh, as the men scurried around the little maze. There was no place to rest, for every corner hid the unknown. There was no security in such a small place. There was not even air, for the ice storms choked out breath and filled the lungs with deathly chill. There was only the hope that the scurrying might bring escape, that the walls might come crumbling down.

It was the life of a rat to struggle to eke out survival in a world created by someone you could not and would not ever understand. To throw yourself into the fray over and over, just for a chance at life. To not see what lay in the future, or even the past, lost in a sea of blind walls, empty corridors, and silent ends.

The battle was no great success. It was no miracle of the House of Brandenburg, as the sparing of Frederick the Great after Kunersdorf and the return of Rapunzel had been called. 25,000 French casualties were matched with only 10,000 Austrian ones, and the French could not spare their lives as easily as the Austrians could. But the mazes, walls, and storms had worked and given the French enough distance to retreat. They would escape to fight again. If half of Napoleon's army had been captured in those three days, then the following German campaign would not even have had a glimmer of hope. As it stood, things were already very bleak. Although the Austrians had been delayed a great deal, and 40,000 of them would perish of starvation over those months, they had manpower to spare. The Kaiserliche was the only force that could match the Grande Armee at its height in size, and, unlike Napoleon's army, it had not been depleted by long years of war. When the Austrians had abandoned the continent rather than surrender, the men had lain in wait. Now, the time had come. Austria was free, truly free, with the forces of the Emperor retaking the country. 50,000 gone, but another 235,000 brought into active service. Come spring 1813, the Austrian army would pour into Germany with 395,000 men.

Julius Alone

It was true that Napoleon's genius had slightly diminished. But it was equally true, and perhaps far more important, that his officer corps had been devastated ever since Russia. He needed them. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy, and as such, the plan must be adjusted mid-combat. That took a mind capable of completely grasping the plan, understanding the strengths and weaknesses, and reacting to events in a way that continues to maximize the plan's strengths. It took initiative, resolve, and skill. They were also the voices in Napoleon's ear reminding him that he was not invincible. They could revise plans before they were set in action. Each corps commander was like the leader of a tiny army. He had lost too many. Anna Hohenzollern, who had only 4 years experience, was one of his most senior marshals. It was a sad state of affairs. A brigadier is not a corps commander. The brigadier is still primarily focused with the execution of the plan. The corps commander decides the plan. Take Gettysburg. Lee's corps commanders had failed at Gettysburg, and the corps had not taken initiative and pressed when the time was right, and shied away when it was not, and the corps commanders did not evaluate the situation as generals in their own right. Such things cost battles, and turned crushing victories into minor ones. Even a great general like Napoleon could not face the world alone. Yet now, the fate of the army rested solely upon his genius.

Wellington crossed the Saison river. Napoleon had now met the enemy, and he was his. Napoleon's forces were split between Biderin and Sauveterre-de-Bearn. Wellington now had a Morton's fork facing him. Advance to cross the second river, the Gave d'Oloron, and Napoleon would flank from Biderin. Retreat east, and the enemy would simply strike from the rear. Return across the river, and the enemy would strike while the crossing was prepared. Attack Biderin, and the forces at Sauveterre-de-Bearn would strike from behind.

Wellington attempted to break the main force at Sauveterre-de-Bearn. He had local superiority, and if he could break the French, he could march across the bridge and take their old position and use that terrain advantage to rout the other French force as they chased.

French courage was now pitted and British and Spanish courage.

French courage won. The Coalition force broke while storming the bridge, the artillery and massed fire littering the crossing with bodies. The flanking force at Biderin then arrived and slammed into their flank. They now turned and run. It was the time to turn the victory into a decisive one. Dreams of triumph against the world now flashed through Napoleon's mind, and he gave chase. Napoleon had always used his cavalry well. Cavalry was the coin that purchased great victories. Cavalry ran the fleeing enemy down and captured their forces. The army he had now, though, was not the army he thought he had, or the army he had in his heyday. A hussar was a blackguard if he lived past thirty. Anna, Princess of Arendelle, was only 29, and already had an impressive medley of injuries, though her most immediately recognizable one was yet to come. His cavalry was not the cavalry he used to have. His cavalry had died in the burning sands of Egypt for him. They had died in the olive groves of Italy for him. They had died in the forests of Germany for him. They had died in the wasting muds and hell-frozen earth of Russia for him. They had died in the plains of Iberia for him. Now he was alone with green boys, with more valor than sense, and no experience to temper their bravado. The cavalry were unable to carry the day at the Battle of Sauveterre-de-Bearn, and the Coalition retreated back to the Saison. There were 10,000 French casualties to 35,000 Coalition ones.

The French impacted, and again French courage was tested. This time, it failed. The Coalition men were now backed up against the river, and had to fight or drown. They chose to fight. Again and again, the French attacked, but the Coalition would not give. Finally, the French broke and ran. The Coalition had paid a heavy blood toll, but the bridge was now theirs to cross. Another 25,000 Coalition casualties matched another 12,500 French ones, but the Coalition

had the manpower to spare, and Napoleon had not won the decisive victory he needed.

Napoleon's cavalry was no longer the force it used to be. His corps commanders could no longer aid him. Napoleon was alone. If a victory was won, he could not rely on his cavalry to enhance it anymore. It was a lesson he would take to heart at Leipzig. He had the momentum and the focus, but no longer the mass to drive his victories to greatness.

Now came the panic. Napoleon hurried back through France, then to Germany, recruiting everyone he could get his hands on. Boys of 14 and 15 were forced to take up arms and join in one last great patriotic struggle. Another 80,000 would join his army, but they were still grievously outnumbered, and the enemy advance continued. The winter was setting in, and the last glimmers of hope were fading.

Killing Fields: Intermission

An entire generation had been born in war. It is difficult to even comprehend the reality of it. It was a war fought with all the intensity of total war, over all the duration of the more limited wars of today, and then some. The wars began in 1792. It was now the dawning of 1813. Someone born on the dawn of the Revolutionary Wars would now be an adult ready to die in the Napoleonic Wars. An entire generation had been consumed by the war, and yet the war kept going. The war raised an entire new generation to die. The revolution had been born when Anna was five. The war was still going over twenty years later, and now Anna was an important general in it. There were now men fighting in the war that had literally never known peace. When they were playing their schoolyard games, the war was raging. When they grew to adulthood, the war was still raging, and now it called to them.

Fields had been foraged continuously for twenty years. Cities had been burnt, rebuilt, and burnt again for twenty years. Boots had trampled paths underfoot for twenty years. The hills and valleys had rung with gunfire for twenty years. The continent of Europe was war ravaged. If the First World War had lost a generation, than this one had lost more. It was a conflict that claimed the lives of millions upon millions when the population of the entire world was only one billion people. Summing up both the Revolutionary and the Napoleonic phase, almost ten million people had died, with many of those deaths being ordinary civilians. Twice as long as the US invasion of Afghanistan. Three times as long as Iraq. A quarter more than Vietnam. There was no end to it, and for many, no beginning either. It was the way of the world. Peace was a far more abnormal state. Nor was it the sort of war that could be ignored most of the time. It blazed across the continent, it conscripted vast legions of men. It ground away at manpower, and manpower is just a nicer way of saying the brothers, sons, and fathers of families. War had come to every continent on Earth save Australia.

Who knew what would come about once the war was over? By this point, peace seemed almost unthinkable. War was the way of mankind.

And yet, the war was nearly at an end.

Konigreich

Author Notes: Alright, I now feel the need to add this. This chapter is weird. It's really fucking weird. You can skip it and not miss much, and don't be afraid to if weird isn't your thing. I'd rather you skip a tiny piece of the story over stop reading. Disclaimer complete.

I had never liked the fat bastard anyways.

Heaven almighty, what was there to like? Those glaring, lopsided, misshapen eyes crammed into that cueball of a head. They were always judging and probing you. Every man had his number and his price, but certainly, there was no need to be so transparent about it. That was just discourteous. If your price wasn't right, if you couldn't cough up what he needed, then you weren't getting a moment's attention from him. He would turn back and polish his counter, or polish the glasses, or polish the taps, or polish the floor. He was polishing, always polishing. The tavern always had to look in tip top condition. If he did anything else, hell if I knew. Seemed like he lived his whole life there.

I had a cabin up in the mountains. It was nice, clean, and isolated. The air was thin there, but it was the only place I could really breath. Everywhere else, the din of other mens' thoughts drowns out your own. Solitude and reflection, that is what makes a man. Everyone ought to find such a peace in nature. It was a hopelessly romantic dream. The world was shrinking, and man was growing. The wild places were being stolen away. But still, I selfishly hoarded mine. In such a place, my creaturely character could express itself to the fullest. Out in the wilds, where all are animals, one realizes just how intertwined man is with nature. I was but an animal, but was there something so wrong with that? It was a purer way to live. When the snowmelt meets the world, that was where I drank. Where the wild things pranced, that was where I hunted. Oh, pure atavism. The shelter of a sheltered man at the twilight of the world.

That was where I was, then, when I saw them. An army train, miles long, was marching into town. I gazed at that golden, halcyon string, and was in awe. Banners of the sun and republic fluttered behind them, the vain posturing of a truly pompous and splendid chimeric overflowing with loveliness. What was I before such a beast, and surely this was a beast. What was I? I, carrying a satchel of goods, creature comforts for a simple creature such as myself. The snake wormed its into the egg, and I saw, in sublime glory, the devouring. The city, the seed of corruption, it was burning! Oh, for a fiddle I would've traded the pearls of the world, just so I could sing a dirge as old Nero did! Then came the screaming, such screaming! Like the wailing of the rabbit as the jaws snapped shut around it. High-pitched, and in great multitudes it came. The city, it had been rearranged.

Then came the silver, in quantities not matched by even the greatest glories of Cyrus. Sprouting came the trees, the ice spears a flurry from that good earth. The roads, they were overgrown with the vines and fruits of frost! Oh, weep, Demeter, and know that you are outmatched! The frost, spiraling into gracious pattern, weaving across the countryside in walls and threads. It was enough to give Arachne envious blush. The embroidery was not to be matched by even a thousand slave children in the Dragon Emperor's seductive caverns, and how would Cathay gnash and howl to be outmatched so!

At last, a storm came, white and beautiful. It formed into a great column over the city, and was held on a high note, as the very cup of trembling. The release came, and that pillar of salt dissolved into wisps, and all was still once more.

I stowed away my satchel, and returned to town.

There was the beast, a burnt out carcass, ribs hanging in the quiet night. The fat man, he was beating the earth, and he was beating his chest. His voice was hoarse and thick, and over and over he cursed "the Polish bitch, the Polish bitch, why has she done this to me?". He raised his hands again, and I saw the knuckles, raw and bloody.

Glimmer his eyes did, and he prostrated himself. In kneeling agony, he began to shovel handfuls of ash into his greedy mouth, never stopping to chew or swallow. The raw scream escaped me, and I buried my face in shame for it. I left this city of mirrors and returned to my home, never pausing to see my own reflection.

At home, I rested sweetly, and drank of the pure clean mountain springs. Come dawn, however, the whore called me again, and I returned to its tender womb. Musket and shovel in hand, I descended the path. The man had frozen to death in the night, and I gazed onto his stony form. I grabbed the shovel, and tore my shirt off me, then ripped it to shreds. My work was here. I smashed the body. I chopped, I hacked, I butchered. Each bit of meat, I bashed apart. I severed the spine, crushed the vertebrae. The skull, I slammed into the ground over and over, until it broke and the sticky sap ran out. The larger eye, it would not yield. A sapphire jewel, it was impervious to even my harshest blows. This, I pocketed, a keepsake of the times. I looked upon my work, and saw that it was good. I burned it. The man was reduced to ashes.

I gathered up the ashes as best I could. Stinging tears were running down my cheeks, hot and salty. They mixed into the remains of the dead man. I began to cast fistfuls of the ash into the air, watching as the little things showered down and fell into the ashes of the tavern. My own chest grew mottled and discolored, stained gray with the last bits of a fat bastard. Then, the ashes were gone, lost among the remains of the tavern.

All those ashes would be swept away by the Austrian wind, just as I would be. Kaiserliche called.

Kaiserliche

Franz was a nice man. He was always respectful to his elders, and kind to children. His surname was not important, since he was not important.

He kept his uniform clean, and his shoes polished. He marched without grumbling, and ate without complaint. He was a patriot, convinced of the nobleness of the cause. He loved the countryside. He had hobbies. He enjoyed woodworking, a bit of sewing, and would occasionally hike. Franz loved his brothers and his sisters. He had three brothers and two sisters. Franz gave to the poor, and did not envy the rich. Franz was a kind-hearted young man. There were hundreds of thousands of Franzes in the Austrian army, with slight variations among them. Franz was a private, one of many, less than even an afterthought in the historical record. When the call came, he was kissed by his grandmother, hugged his mother, saluted his father, reassured his siblings, and then was off. Wholesome young men were the sinews of war.

His helmet was a Tschako. There were hundreds of thousands of Tschakos just like it, and it could be easily replaced. It was a standard hat. It was kept to regulation. His uniform was of the German, and not the Hungarian style, as was expected. He had a brown cowhide pack, and a wooden water canteen. The greatcoat would normally be hung on the pack, but southern Germany had frozen over, so Franz was wearing the greatcoat. It was warm and snugly.

He followed the battalionsfahne, whether it led him to death or not. The colors were more important than he. He fought for the honor of Austria, and he would not shame his loving Fatherland.

Far off, a bullet was being cast. The lead poured into the mold, and it cooled. Satisfied with the quality, it was dumped unceremoniously with thousands of its kind, and boxed up. From there, it would

proceed to a supply depot, be lost amongst swirling storms of paperwork, be transferred to a caravan, be bumped and jumbled along the harsh dirt paths, see the sunlight once more, be handed out to the appropriate hand, stored once more, but in a more personal manner, hear the hewing and crying of combat, be pulled out of its safe bed, jammed down Franz's musket with some powder, and then fly.

Franz was not special. The bullet was not special. But the exact intersection of everything, this set of coincidences, was special. That bullet now had a very special name on it, and a very special time on it.

The Battle of Waterloo.

Marshal Anna Hohenzollern, 'Demon of the North'.

It had not yet arrived. For now, Franz hacked diligently away at the ice blocking the German roads with his ax. The march northwards could not be stopped.

Kameraden

"Here's to an end to soup, and good riddance!" shouted the soldier.

"I like soup," replied his comrade.

"Well, Hansel, I used to like soup too. Then we drank soup for more than a year, and I decided that soup was awful."

"I can't believe I used to like walking!" said a third.

"You don't like walking anymore?" asked a fourth.

"You still do?"

"It builds leg strength."

"You're full of shit."

A man sauntered into the clearing, rags wrapped around his hands. The Tschako he was wearing had a bit more gold weave to it than the others. He walked up to the campfire. He warmed his hands against the fire for a moment, then raised his head.

"Just finished talking to the cavalry scouts. Thaw soon, soldiers!"

His words were met by a raucous cheer, and the men continued their eating and drinking.

"I'll never take a visit to Saxony for granted ever again!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You know they've got a woman general, right?"

"Everyone knows that, you damned idiot."

"You know she fucks her sister, right?"

"Oh yeah, that's the part of the legend of the Demon you have to keep in mind, the fucking. Not the stabbing, or the shooting. Your head, it's in a good place."

"Well, can't you imagine it? Those soft, graceful hands stroking the arch of the back, coaxing those little wanting screams out? The sweet kisses on the nape of the neck, as they stroke each others' smooth, supple skin? The little massages and squeezes they give as they giggle and toss about, before finally falling asleep, eyes locked in loving embrace? Ah, such a fragrant and forbidden love!"

"And then you show up, and present the bratwurst, yes?"

"Of course! A righteous Hungarian man to lead them away from their sinful ways! I will make my Magyar ancestors proud. They came, they saw, they conquered... the native girls as much as the native warriors. Heh."

"Ridiculous, this one. Ought to throw him off a cliff one day."

"I'd like to see you try. My saber is mightier than any gun."

"I bet they'll break and run as soon as they see us."

"Sure they will, they're only fighting out of fear."

"Exactly. They'll be more scared of us than they are of the Bitch Queen."

"Perhaps they'll even depose her."

"Ahh, but she only has daughters. There must always be a Bitch Queen."

"True, true."

One of the soldiers drew himself up proudly, and brought his hand to stroke his chin.

"You know, I saw Blucher once."

"Big deal, and I've seen Napoleon."

"I really did see Blucher though."

"And I really saw Napoleon. He was a blue speck up on the hill."

"No, I mean Blucher led a charge that ran down my unit."

"So how'd you live then, eh?"

"Well, he was charging right at us. The man seemed older than even the mountains. His face was weathered like granite, and there was a blazing fire in his eyes. I bet you could kill everyone around him, and he still wouldn't break. The way he steered his horse... well, it was something else. Like they were one unit, one big ball of death. All the Coronans were looking at him too, not us. It was eerie. Like he was controlling all of their heads, like his will was the will of the whole army. Even when they were firing on us, they were looking at him. It was like they wouldn't break unless he did, and he would never break. A shell went over me, and I felt the white heat burning at my back before I blacked out. A few hours later, I woke up in a field of bodies, my arm broken. Ended up wandering back to our camps eventually."

The men had paused, ceasing their banter. Finally, another offered a story.

"I was walking forward once. We were in a row, and my best friend was next to me. Then, boom. An ice spike right through him. His guts were wrapped around it like ornaments on a Christmas tree. His mouth was stuck, frozen in a scream. I didn't want to look any more, so I didn't. We kept marching."

"... Yeah. This one is for old friends. May we meet them all again in God's loving arms."

The soldier began to pour the alcohol into the ground, but a hand stopped him.

"Officer is here. Wouldn't want to waste anything. We might need it someday. Pour it into the pot."

So they poured the drink into the soup, and they stirred. The dozens of battles through the years, the ones with only tens of thousands of men on each side, with corps bumping into each other on accident, or minor disputes, these were forgotten, mostly, by history. Military historians would look upon them, but only as footnotes to those great decisive battles of the wars. Even in this recounting, they were lost. But these men, they remembered. So they looked into the soup, and they saw their lost friends again.

"To old friends, then."

"Amen."

"We'll see them again."

"For the survivors... we pour out another after this battle."

"We'll all live."

"You know we won't. Make the promise."

"Yes, we shall."

"Into Saxony then."

"Yes, into Saxony. Let's get stuck in, boys."

Killing an Empire

Napoleon had fought several battles going up France and through Germany, but none had been decisive. Now, with his men in Saxony, he knew there was no more ground to give. Beyond Saxony was Corona. The battle was forced for political reasons as much as it was for military ones. If Leipzig was lost, then the Austrians would push straight into Corona, and Napoleon would be fighting a war against all of Europe without allies. It was decided to make a stand. The 20th of October would be known as the first day of the Battle of Leipzig, also known as the Battle of the Nations. It was the largest battle continental Europe had ever seen, and would remain the largest for almost one hundred years.

Leipzig was a supremely defensible position, interlaced heavily with rivers. The bridges in the area had all been destroyed beforehand, save the ones Napoleon intended to use in case of retreat. The enemy would have to march around a great distance to adjust their angle of attack. Meanwhile, Napoleon's forces could make the river crossings easily, as they were in the spoke of a great wheel of rivers. This allowed a comparatively small force to defend the rear and the flanks of Napoleon's army. Napoleon himself could deploy the bulk of his forces between the Pleisse and Parthe, allowing to launch an offensive with what was likely to be local superiority in numbers, even if he was actually gravely outnumbered. Field Marshal Blucher was supreme commander of Corona's military, and was tasked with holding the western flank. He had 40,000 men split evenly between cavalry and infantry, and all equipped for mobility. Ney and Murat were both given a corps, and together had 20,000 men to hold the village of Mockern, which dominated the north. 10,000 men were held in reserve and commanded by Poniatowski, an up and coming Coronan general. Tiny bumps of ice were set up, acting as speedbumps for charging enemy forces, giving more time to act with fire and artillery. If they stopped to burn the ice, they would deny ground to themselves and still give the French time. Walls were set up. These walls were not meant to aid in the battle, as they would

hamper the action of artillery. Instead, they served as signals to where the enemy had penetrated. Forces could be shifted appropriately. Napoleon and Rapunzel had both sent out orders for heavy conscription efforts, and despite all his losses, Napoleon was still able to deploy 240,000 men to the main front, with MacDonald and Bertrand commanding the flanks on the main offensive. Still, veterans had been redistributed and certain battalions combined to give an even spread of experience, and Napoleon had certain units earmarked and deployed in a manner to minimize the damage from early routs. With his forces deployed, Napoleon readied himself to see the enemy response, and prepared his attack. In total, Napoleon had brought 310,000 men to the battle.

Napoleon's counterpart for this battle was the Count of Schwarzenburg. He had drawn up a plan in which the main group of forces would attack Napoleon head-on, advancing along the Pleisse. The rest would attempt to break through on the western flank and crush Blucher, then move in through Leipzig and strike Napoleon from behind. Other coalition leaders heavily objected to this plan, but the Austrians refused to yield. Austria was providing, by far, the bulk of the forces at Leipzig, and it could overrule any grumbling. 70,000 men had completed the journey from the west, and 370,000 Austrians had arrived from the south. 120,000 men were assigned to break the west, and 320,000 to the main front. In total, the Coalition had brought 440,000 men to the battle. An unprecedented 750,000 were participating.

The first strikes were to the west and south. In the west, Blucher was facing 120,000 men. He had three prepared positions to fall back to. The first was beyond Lindenau, the second behind Lindenau, and the third along the rivers surrounding Leipzig. Battle began at the first line, with 80,000 Coalition men assaulting the position. After an hour of harsh fighting, Blucher gave the order to fall back to the second line before they were overrun. Even that, however, began to fall underneath a vigorous struggle. When two flanking forces of 20,000 Austrians each came from surrounding forces, the Coalition began to panic and break. The battle would have been lost, then, if

not for Blucher. He stood firm on the line, despite everyone around him running. He was plainly visible to both friend and foe, and shots whizzed by his passive, wrought-iron face. One by one, the fleeing Coronans looked back at him. It was a sight to put them all to shame. Here they were, young, hearty men fleeing from the field of battle, while their general, whose life was far more valuable, and who was already wearied and weakened by the ravages of age, stood firm and unyielding. Nothing, it seemed, could make Blucher waver. The Coronans reformed their lines and held. Still, the attack was witheringly strong in power. However, by noon, it had become clear that no attacks were coming on the other flanks. Murat and Poniatowski both redeployed to the western flank, and with reinforcements coming in, Blucher made a savage counter-attack and broke the Austrian morale. 20,000 of them were killed, and 10,000 captured, the rest sent fleeing.

Napoleon dealt with the main flank. The enemy came marching along the river, but the artillery fire was dreadful indeed. Furthermore, their numbers were not as effective as they seemed. Part of the infantry and artillery had to be given special fire munitions to ward away enemy ice deployment, weakening their effectiveness against enemy infantry. Much like how the fences broke Pickett's charge, the icy speed-bumps continually sapped momentum from the Austrian advance. Artillery rained down upon the Austrians. Shots whistled past and through them. Their numbers served to inconvenience them. With so many men packed onto one field, it gave the French artillery a very large and welcoming target. Still, the sheer mass of the advance threatened to break the French. Indeed, a case can be made that it could have. Napoleon was expecting to hold local superiority, but instead the Austrians outnumbered him there. He had advanced early on, in an attempt to carry out his initial plan of offense. This had only overextended his forces and reduced the distance between him and the Austrians. Unfortunately, there was no way he could successfully attack a force so much larger. Napoleon's lines began to fail, when his deliverance arrived. At roughly 3:30, a division of cuirassiers smashed into the Austrian flank, followed by the rest of the force defending the western flank.

Blucher himself was leading the charge, and the flanking maneuver soon rolled right down the enemy line. The Austrians broke and fled. Although the larger groups could melt their way through icy obstacles, smaller groups could not, and they were either killed or captured. Napoleon had held the field, as fighting died down on the first day.

The second day began with another unsuccessful assault. The Austrians had expected the French to stop extending themselves and fall back, and they did. But a contingent of Polish men had volunteered to remain in Wachau. As the Austrians passed by, the Polish sprung from their hiding spots and attacked from the rear. Then they tied up new advancing waves and waves turning back in brutal street-to-street combat, and as they were dying, burned down the village. By noon, Coalition commanders had decided the plan was not working. Schwarzenburg drew up a new plan, in which the Coalition would encircle the town of Leibniz and attack on all sides. This way, Napoleon would be spread thin, and a break anywhere could win the battle.

The second day of fighting was primarily in the villages of Mockern to the north, and Libertwolkwitz in the south.

Mockern was surrounded by swampy land, ringed with a series of walls from the lowest in the outside to the innermost manor walls, and now covered with even more artificial ice defenses. French gun positions and infantry lines covered every approach with fire. Infantry assaulted the positions again and again, but could do nothing in the face of French fire. Bodies sank into the ghastly swamp. At one point, with the battle well balanced and victory in reach, the Austrians sent in a cavalry charge. Unfortunately, the ground had been disturbed with ice in a way as to be slippery, rough, and uneven all at once, and the horses were unable to properly maneuver or strike. The French fire claimed them as well. With the failing of the assaults, both sides simply shot their artillery at each other well into the night. Fortress Mockern would not fall.

A grand battery had been formed in Libertwolkwitz, and it had dealt much of the damage that had ravaged the Austrian army over the last two days. It was now decided to seize the village. First, they sent ahead assault forces. However, the battery was in far too strong of a position, and the attacks failed. Then Napoleon replied by sending Blucher and Murat out to attack the enemy lines, but the Austrians were too great in number, and their cavalry was lighter and able to harass the French attackers. The French retreated back to the village. The Austrians then attempted to clear out the French position using fire weapons. The nerve of the French gunners was tougher than steel, though, and Napoleon personally arrived to rally the men. Staying low and to the ground, and rearranging cannon as appropriate, they kept the batteries sounding. Napoleon was not the only one with an elite guard. The Austrians now fielded their grenadiers. Forming into infantry squares, the grenadiers stormed the village. All the cannon fire and gunshots did not dampen their will, even when comrades began to fall, and the guard forced the French to retreat. The village was theirs, but the elite Austrian grenadiers were now spent. They would need time to recover.

A few skirmishes near Lindenau rounded out the day. As dusk fell, Napoleon sent an envoy offering to negotiate peace and end the war. The Coalition refused. Victory could still be theirs.

The third day opened with the arrival of fresh Coalition forces from Sweden, south Germany, and Austria. Another 115,000 had arrived to bolster the Coalition. With fresh forces, they planned their most aggressive assault yet. Napoleon now came under fire from every side except for the west, and wave after wave slammed into them. The outer ring of defensive villages was lost as the Austrians surged forward, full of vigor and hunger. Next, the inner ring of defenses was attacked, and the villages themselves burned with the ferocity of fighting. This was quite literal. The sparking of guns and the firing of cannon set many a building on fire, and those fires spread. Not only that, but the incendiary munitions used by the Coalition were also burning away the fields surrounding Leipzig. The world was fuel for the flame. As the day stretched on, the French were pushed further

back, until they were standing directly in front of Leipzig. However, at this point, they would not break any further. Napoleon had chosen his terrain well. No matter how strong the push, he was able to cycle his forces over to that part of the line, then return them immediately to their original positions. The French forces flowed along the Leipzig rivers as swiftly as the water did. Blucher and Murat were able to secure repeated flanks on the Austrians using river crossings. Indeed, at more than one time they would both flank from opposite sides at once, and the Austrians would immediately shatter. Once again, the day was Napoleon's. He had seen the best the Coalition could offer, and had bested it. Who could doubt his genius now? The man had faced down the world, with his back against the wall, and still triumphed. He had won at Leipzig! The Austrians were now unwilling to attack further, and the city was still his. He would not go after them now. He had learned his lesson against Wellington. Though they were victorious, they were almost completely out of powder and shot, the men were exhausted beyond belief, and provisions in the city were running low. The fields around Leipzig had been completely foraged away by the Coalition troops, and could not support any continued action. It was time to call his victory and leave.

With their forces humbled, perhaps now the British and Austrians would negotiate. Many writers, Hollywood directors, and amateur historians have opted to end the battle here. It was poetically fitting, after all. Napoleon, the man of destiny, had defied fate and won a victory over a Coalition of all Europe. They had sent their mightiest against them, and been found wanting. Blucher, proud commander of the Prussian army, who had seen a literal lifetime of war, had won one last great victory, and could now go into a peaceful retirement. A distinguished end to a distinguished career. He had begun his life of war at age 16, and now it could end, with Blucher now in his seventies. It was a ferocious battle, with much shock action, fitting a man with a ferocious and spirited character. Napoleon, who had wanted to make Paris a city beyond all others, would finally be able to enact his peacetime reforms. He had dreamed an impossible dream. The distances of Europe were too great for his time. It simply

took too long to march from one end to another. By the time he had defeated one foe, another would spring up, fresh and eager on the other side of the continent. Despite that, he had his victory. All of Europe had tried to suppress France and the Revolution, and yet victory was still in Napoleon's hand. Not only had France survived, it had even expanded. At this point, Napoleon would have to surrender his satellite possessions, but the French Empire itself was still much larger than pre-revolution France.

If not for a crab, he would have ruled it all.

Poniatowski volunteered to fight a rearguard action while the remainder of the army retreated through Lindenau. They would regroup at a secure position, resupply, and negotiate the peace.

At the dawning of Leipzig, the Danish had been over a hundred miles away. No one would have expected their sudden arrival through imperfect terrain. However, each time King Eric stopped to rest, he felt the snapping of a crab claw upon his rear. With motivation given, he forced the Danish army into a fearsome forced march. Neither Napoleon nor any of his marshals had planned for this. The French were extended awkwardly, with half of the army in a marching column, and the rest preparing to leave. Only the rearguard was battle ready, and they were still in Leipzig. The Danish army slammed right into Napoleon's side, and immediately the Grande Armee was thrown into disarray. People attempted to rout every which way. Seeing and hearing the din of renewed combat, the Austrians rallied and rejoined the fray, attacking the disorganized French. Napoleon was one of only a few thousand to escape. Blucher would be dealt a leg wound that would claim his life before the decade was out. A shell landed near Anna Hohenzollern, and only the quick self-sacrifice of a nearby corporal stopped it from gutting her. She was quickly captured by Austrian dragoons. Poniatowski drowned in the fighting, as he was blasted from his horse into the river. Elsa was knocked unconscious by a nearby impact, and enemy infantry fell upon her. By the time one of the Austrian officers arrived to intervene, she had been bloodied and

bruised all over. Her nose and several bones were broken, and teeth had been knocked out. If the officer had arrived any later, undoubtedly she would have been clubbed to death.

The dream was broken, and the French army was completely shattered. The French had sustained 110,000 casualties in the battle, and inflicted 265,000 casualties. But in the ensuing debacle of the fourth day, all but 7000 French had been killed, wounded, or captured. Now Napoleon ran back to France, to try and slap together defenses out of stout but completely untrained men. Corona was forced to surrender. Napoleon's own remaining time now numbered in months. Leipzig, so close to being a victory, had been snatched away at the last moment.

Lying Around: Intermission

Anna sidled up nervously to the wooden door. With tepid anxiety and shakes in her knees, she knocked. No response.

"Elsa? I know you're in there. Please... answer me."

Nothing.

"I never meant for you to get hurt, I swear. I'm sorry."

Still no answer.

"... Do you hate me? I'd understand if you did."

Silence.

Anna wiped away the tears that were starting to form. It was okay. She'd just scared away her sister. Just alienated the best and closest friend she'd ever have or ever would have. It was fine. She had been lonely for so long, she could go back to that. Anna began to walk away.

She heard a sputtering cough from inside, then some grumbling.

"Come in," said her sister.

The room was dark and dry. Even through the shadows, though, Anna could tell her sister wasn't looking at her.

"Elsa?" asked Anna.

"If you're wondering why I'm not looking at you, it's because I physically can't right now. Could you light the lamp?"

Anna lit the lamp. Mottled lumps of bloody cotton were unceremoniously scattered over Elsa's face, and her body was

wrapped neck to toe in stiff starched bandages.

"Could you also clean the cotton off my face? I had to spit it out just now. Dr. Seutin put these in my mouth to staunch the bleeding, but they make it impossible to talk."

Anna looked at Elsa. She was beaten up all over. Her lip was bloody and split, teeth were missing, and her left eye was a rich shade of purple. She swept the balls of used cotton away. Anna's face formed into a guilty grimace.

"I did this to you. This is all my fault!"

"No, a bunch of angry Austrians did this. I deserve this anyways."

"Why would you ever say that?"

"Remember the ship? The one that sank?"

"You saved our lives! They were enemy combatants, I don't see how-"

"I was getting off to that."

"Huh? Oh. Ummm... oh. I... ummm..."

"Yeah."

"I brought something for you."

"I can't see what you're holding. Immobile, Anna."

"Oh, right, silly me, stupid me, never-"

"You're not stupid, Anna. Just tell me what you have."

"It's the Fun Box!"

Anna unlocked a wooden chest, and retrieved a familiar snowman from inside.

"Hey, I don't mean to be a bother, but... this box hasn't been very fun. At all. It's almost like an anti-Fun Box," said Olaf.

"Sure it is!" said Anna.

"Yes, it's a pretty Fun Box," replied Elsa.

"Oh, alright. It's just that I hear screaming and yelling from outside, and it gets me a litttttllle bit worried sometimes," said Olaf.

"They're just... really excited to get inside their own Fun Boxes. Olaf, look, it's Elsa! Elsa loves warm hugs," said Anna.

"Oh boy! I love warm hugs too! We have so much in common, it's uncanny."

Olaf waddled over and began to hug Elsa's full-body cast. After a few minutes of hugging, he got back up.

"Alright Olaf, back into the Fun Box. We're going to have some more Fun now," said Anna.

"I don't want to go back into-"

"Sure you do, it's fun!"

Anna jammed Olaf back into the box and locked it.

"We should really tell him what's actually happening while he's in the Fun Box," said the Queen.

"We are never, ever, ever telling him anything. I don't want to spoil his innocence," replied Anna.

"Fine."

"So how's life?"

"Well, my butt itches. My leg itches. My whole body itches, and I can't scratch any of it. I can't scratch any of it for the next few months. My vision is fixed squarely on those blue dots you see on the ceiling. I've gotten to know them very well. Every few hours, Dr. Seutin stuffs more cotton in my mouth, but I must scream."

"Not fun?"

"Not fun."

Like Skulls, but Skullier

This was quite possibly the stupidest reason for a fight in the history of everything.

As usual, she woke up with a piece of paper on her face. "Daily Spooky Reminder that you have SKELETON in your body! Woooooooooo!"

If she blinked quickly enough, she could knock it off her face. She had gotten very good at that. The slip of paper wafted gently down into a pile with the rest of the them. The Skeleton in your Body message was the most common one, and it usually was repeated every few days. The reminders ranged from the laughably wrong ("Insects have extra skeletons! Woooooooooo!"), to the logically torturous ("Skeletons are made from milk. Babies love milk. Babies love skeletons! Woooooooooo!"), to the nutritional ("Coconuts are the most skull-like of all fruits. Eat more coconuts. Woooooooooo!"), to the absolutely absurd ("Pirates put skulls on their flag. I have a skull on my head. Therefore, I am a flag. Woooooooooo!"). At first, she thought the daily reminders were a joke. More and more, though, she wondered if Anna actually believed the things she wrote. This, like most bad things, was probably her fault. Had she really given Anna brain damage all those years ago? Certainly very plausible.

She looked up at the ceiling. Another new skull had been pasted there. The letters were slowly forming. Right now, it said "SPOC". Chances were, the word was "SPOOKY". It was at least a change of scenery. One of the skulls was starting to come loose, paste stretching out in a spindly string. Was it tearing right now? The skull fell, bonking Elsa in the face, then rolling off and hitting the ground with a tiny pomf. That answered that question.

She would take it all back if she could. She didn't even care that much, the matter had mostly just struck her as faintly ridiculous. But it had struck a chord in Anna, and that was that.

"Hey Elsa, I got us hats! Punzie is changing the uniform. See these? They started using them back when Frederick the Great was around. So much history. You like history, right?"

"But... we're not in the army anymore. Besides, Corona surrendered."

"Oh yeah, it's more like a planned uniform change. So I asked her to give us two of the new hats as a special gift. We can be twinsies! Aren't these hats the cutest thing?"

"They've got skulls on them."

"Yeah! Oh, they're so adorable. Mmmm, they're so fuzzy and warm and skull-covered. Nice. Convenient too. I'll come riding by, and some mean dude will be like 'oh, look at that sexy stone cold fox with the two skulls, I don't know what skull to shoot, blarg I'm dead.'"

"I'm not wearing that hat. It's covered in skulls."

"... Oh. Oh, I see. I see how it is. Everything I like is bad, and evil, and cruel, and everything you like is so perfect and good and nice! Because you're the perfect one! And if I complain, you can just shut me out again like you did YEARS AND YEARS! Well, you know what? YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN PLAY THAT GAME! I can shut you out too, how are you going to like that, huh? You'll see me again when you write me an apology letter! GOOD DAY SIR!"

Anna had stomped out and slammed the door behind her. Elsa was more than willing to apologize. There was one big problem with that plan, though. One big problem that Anna seemingly still hadn't realized. Elsa was in no position to apologize. Indeed, she was in no position to do anything that wasn't talking, staring, or blinking. These were a few of the reasons why a full-body cast sucked.

Elsa shuddered. Maybe Anna would leave and forget about her. She would be stuck here forever, alone in a bed surrounded by piles of skulls. Of course, it would all be her fault. What wasn't her fault these days? SPOC. A half-finished message well worthy of a half-finished life.

The skulls stared back at her, the empty sockets mocking her impotence. She had been a fool to think that song and dance numbers could solve her problems. Nothing could solve her problems, they ran too deep. They were all self-inflicted, too. Nobody was keeping her inside after her parents died. Nobody kept her from reaching out all these years. She had stayed an insensitive brat, and now she reaped what she had sown.

She heard the door open. Was it the doctor again? It was Anna, with a jar of paste, ladder, and sack of skulls.

"Hmmm... daily... daily spooky reminder that... that bones... are like onions. You can peel away the outsides and eat the the juicy parts," mumbled Anna.

"Anna!" said Elsa.

"Hey there, you're excited today," replied Anna.

"I thought I would never see you again!"

"Why would you think something silly like that?"

"The... the fight...?"

"What fight?"

"I... I don't think I imagined that... We had a fight."

"I don't remember any fight, but I'm sorry about it. We shouldn't ever fight, because we're like best buddies but better!"

"I missed you."

"I miss Kristoff. This reminds me of the time I woke up next to him in the middle of a minefield on the North Mountains, surrounded by chopped up animals and empty bottles of vodka. We were both naked, and I was covered in mud and camouflage. I had tattooed Kristoff with my menstrual blood. I was holding a knife between my teeth. It smelled like fresh pine needles. Good times."

"Wait, what?"

Elsa tried to scrub the image from her memory. It wasn't working.

"And that's how my son was conceived."

It really, really wasn't working. Why wasn't it working?

"Please, let's change the subject. How... how about trolls?"

"Oh yeah, those guys. Did you know they give terrible advice?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Elsa could see Anna idly juggling flaming knives.

"Tell me about it."

"Sure! One day, I went to visit the trolls for some advice. The troll didn't answer, he just laid there impassively, so I figured I had to beat him in a staring contest to get some help. So we stood there, staring at each other for like an hour, before I blinked. The troll still wasn't doing anything. Turns out, it wasn't a troll at all! It was just a rock. Crazeeee... crazy stuff. Yup."

"Right."

Maybe she did give her sister brain damage. She was a terrible older sister.

Light at the End

Battle after battle ensued in France, but the cause was doomed. With only 80,000 militiamen to his name, Napoleon could not stave off the Coalition's advance. In spring 1814, he abdicated to his young son, who was still playing in the Arendelle palace, completely oblivious to the occurrences on the continent.

In France, the Ancient Regime returned, oblivious to its own death. It shambled, a half-living thing, and sought to impose its will on a people already liberated. The nobles, resentful of the changes, and restored to their old positions by force, foolishly believed that things could return to the way they were. New rights were stripped away. The reforms were rolled back. The revolution was cleaned off the surface of France. Unfortunately for those hapless nobles, the changes had already gone more than skin-deep. The most effective way to enact lasting change is through a reign of blood. Rights won without great struggle are taken for granted. When blood is shed for a cause, then the cause feeds, grows hearty, and can crush the old order. If nothing is sacrificed, then the people do not feel a strong connection, even if the cause is exactly or even more worthy. Social movements are a march to war and death, and those that do not end in the shattering of the world do so because the foe is unwilling to risk its own life, and not for lack of character on the movement's behalf. The nobles thought they could restore their old ways without shedding blood for them. They were sorely mistaken. The people had tasted freedom, and they would not let their empire die so easily. The Ancient Regime was dead.

The nations of Europe stowed away their new weapons. The chemical weapons were harsh and indiscriminate. The incendiaries, even worse. There were cleaner, more humane ways of enacting area-denial, and with peace returning to Europe, the prospect of burning foes alive was repulsive to the extreme. Greek Fire was handy, but their current weapons were simply more efficient for the breaking and defeating of conventional enemies. For them, it was

time to beat swords to plowshares. An opportunity now presented itself. Elsa's powers had only grown with age, but the powers of Europe had developed countermeasures. Now their countermeasures were being stowed away, and, if employed at the correct moment, the world might see what Elsa's power could really do.

The extent of Corona's involvement is still heavily debated. We know that Anna Hohenzollern, at least, was in the plot from the beginning, serving as one of Napoleon's eyes and ears on the continent. Between the Battle of Leipzig and the start of the Hundred Days, historians have uncovered a total of 214 letters between Duchess Ostlandet and Napoleon, and Anna was one of the first to rally to his banner when he landed on the French shore. Napoleon knew the depth of the French people's love for him. Every piece of the French political scene was relayed to his home in exile. The sheer scope of the conspiracy suggests Rapunzel's direct involvement. After all, a significant segment of the Coronan army was reconstituted, given new uniforms, resupplied, and delivered to Napoleon's waiting arms. The Polish elements of the Old Guard were all recalled, suggesting the involvement of someone fluent in Polish. The amount of coordination required means a high-ranking official was involved, and if the conspiracy went that high up, it is logical to assume that it went to the very top. The other powers would assume this to be the case following the Hundred Days. As of late, however, historians have proposed an alternative hypothesis. Traditionally, the documented nervousness and agitation shown by Anna Hohenzollern prior to the Hundred Days has been attributed to her worrying about her sister.

Assume that Anna is the primary force driving the Hundred Days, however, and a different picture emerges. It is a picture of a woman wracked by guilt, worry, and anger, not out of sisterly love, but out of the stresses of orchestrating a new invasion of the continent. Elsa had been hurt before, but Anna did lose control of herself at those times. But to intentionally deceive her sister was a different beast, and one potentially damaging to Anna's self-image and mental

stability. Small wonder that she seemed distressed. It is possible that Rapunzel could convince Elsa to return to war. However, it is certain that Anna could, especially considering Anna monopolized the information flow to the wounded and infirm Elsa. Lying and lying have the same spelling, but very different meanings. Furthermore, as a battlefield princess, Anna had a better grasp of the tactical and strategic implications of Greek Fire, and the potential gains that could be made following disarmament. Rapunzel had never seen war personally. Rapunzel's Polish was much better, but years of leading Polish-dominated cavalry units had improved Anna's skills well beyond fluency. In addition, with Blucher now wounded and returning to retirement, and many of the other generals dead, the Coronan armed forces would see Anna as a natural successor and leader. Rapunzel could not be sure of this, but Anna would be able to feel this firsthand. Finally, Anna saw Elsa freeze over the North and Baltic Sea, while Rapunzel only heard of it through reports and saw secondary effects. Perhaps not damning on its own, but considering the French invasion plan and the path taken during the Hundred Days, it is yet another point in the hypothesis's favor.

Either way, the people of France were restless. The Ancient Regime could not return as if nothing had happened. Blood must be spilled. Napoleon would return and make Europe tremble one last time.

Lives in Retrospect

The letter was mysterious and vague, and a more rational part of me said that it was a trap by slavers. Still, what was life without risk? The wording was unclear despite only using very simple words, and I wondered if I had even read it correctly, or if it had been mailed to the wrong man. It was a source, though, and a primary one at that. So I put on my coat, donned my hat, got my pen and paper, and went out to the docks. The sea air was salty and clean, and a low mist was draped over the shore. The distant horizon was obscured by haze, and the sun shined uneasily, as if fearing to bring its full power to bear on such an unsteady nation. I kept my eyes out, always on the alert, scanning for threats around me.

A man saw me, and began to walk right towards me. He did not appear to have the bearing of a slaver, but one could never be certain with these things. It was possible he was looking for someone else, as well. I tensed, and readied to make my escape if need be. His appearance was thoroughly exotic. A tall, furred cap lay on his head, adorned with the emblem of a skull and crossbones. His face was scarred, and an eyepatch hid the right eye. There was a slight limp to the walk, and the barest tensing of the body could be noticed whenever weight shifted to the left leg. A thick Prussian greatcoat was draped over his body, which appeared thickly muscled. He was not tall, but he intimidated despite that. He wore a military tunic on his chest, festooned with medals, tassels, and ribbons. His mouth was clamped on a meaty cigar, which puffed smoke hungrily. His hair was long and white, with a few strands dangling down to frame the face. A variety of revolvers were hung around his body, most of them of Colt manufacture, although one appeared to be an antique, as were several knives of varying size and shape. One arm rested on a saber dangling from his side, and it rattled and shook with a terrifying bloodlust. Try as I might, I could not discern where the other arm hid. There was a definite fierceness in those piercing blue eyes, and I could tell that he was an implacable foe. He continued his advance. I prepared to run, but I

feared I would be unable to escape such a man. Then, he saluted. I was puzzled.

Then I noticed there was a certain softness to the features that I had not discerned before. Perhaps my initial assumptions had blinded me to it. The very possibility still seemed unlikely, but I would chance it.

"Excuse me... Mrs. H?" asked I.

"Takk, men du trenger ikke være så formell. Kaller meg Anna," said the person.

I blinked a few times. Was there something wrong with my hearing? At least the voice was distinctly feminine.

"Apology for poor English. I am... uhmmm... stupid idiot, forgot sometimes where I am. Hello. Yes, I am contact. Call me Anna," she said.

"So you are the expert?"

"I am. Fought in Napoleon's wars. Should find a better place to talk. Somewhere I can sit."

"Alright."

Her voice was peculiar, and the accent was one I could not quite place. It seemed a mixture between that of several different regions, and upper-class pronunciation was sprinkled with the coarse vulgar tone I recognized from our own army camps. I would best describe it as a cosmopolitan brutality. We walked into town, looking at various places. After a few minutes, my guest stopped and pointed at one of the places.

"There. Looks gut."

"That... establishment does not like my kind to enter, if you understand my meaning."

She simply smiled at me and shrugged.

"So? Who is going to stop me?"

She picked me up with her arm, then pushed open the door with her shoulder. Once inside, she set me down.

"Innkeeper! I would like a glass of beer for both me and my friend."

"No niggers allowed here," said the proprietor.

"Ah, I see I have not been heard. Two glasses of beer, innkeeper."

"I said no niggers."

Anna drew a knife, jagged from years of use.

"You see this knife? I first take knife from husband while in mountains. At wedding, he gives as gift. I know how to use this knife very well. He is a mountain man, yes. I think you know type. Very strong, very rough. I can beat him in fight. Now then. Two beers. I will supply this... tips afterward."

"Is that a threat? I've got a weapon."

"I'm sure you do. I would like if you did not hurt yourself with it. Two beers. Will give tip."

The innkeeper grudgingly acquiesced, and brought us two beers. I was about to drink, when Anna motioned to stop. She took a deep sniff of the beer, then nodded.

"My friend, many men have tried to poison me through the years. None have succeeded. I am afraid I've built a bit of an invincibility. Now then, I suggest you pour two new beers without the cyanide. This beer is evidence, and I have strong friends. But I like you, so new beers," said Anna.

The innkeeper turned a ghostly shade of white, then ran back with two new glasses of beer. Anna gave him 20 marks.

"Now then, let us talk. What do you want to know?" asked Anna.

"Well, everything, I suppose. Could you start from the beginning?" asked I.

"It all started in winter of 1803. A storm was blowing over Europe..."

She relayed me the story of the war, and I took notes. At one point, my concentration was broken. A few people were rabble-rousing outside. Soon enough, though, I was lulled back into the tale.

"And... that was that. The war was over. None of us ever saw or spoke with Napoleon again. He died on a diet of the British poison."

"I see. Why did you fight for him so long?"

"Well... we were dreamers. We were young. We believed in the revolution. We believed in him. You know, he was a man that stirred the fire in your heart. He was very smart and kingly. Who could hold themselves back from such a man? But... I fell in love with the dream too much. I thought it could last forever."

"Would you do it all again?"

"No... no. Most of it, yes. But I betrayed my sister. She was the most pure, kind soul God ever put on this earth, and I abused her trust. I led her into the Hundred Days. It was not her business. She hated fighting. But my selfishness took hold of me. I thought this was the chance. I have never regretted anything more. I think... maybe I make her die too young. I put too much pain into her heart. For more than ten years, I have not seen her. It stings."

"What would you say about war?"

"It's a terrible thing. It is beautiful, yes, but there is so much danger there. You lose control of it. It is strong, stronger than all the men in

it. You are now stumbling into it. Some think it will be short. Impossible. It is based on will. Americans are stubborn. You will bleed, and you will bleed much. But this, this also is needed. To destroy evil, it takes blood, yes?"

"I see."

The rabble from outside grew louder, and Anna suddenly walked outside.

"Hey, it's the nigger lover boy," said one.

"Do you want to fight?" asked Anna.

"You scared, darky boy?" asked another.

"No. I ask if you want fight. If you want fight, we fight, ja?"

"We're gonna give you the beating of a lifetime," said a third.

"Okay. We fight then," said Anna.

One of them stepped forward, and Anna slammed a haymaker into him, sending him flying back. Another drew his knife, and dashed at Anna. She stepped on his foot, grabbed the knife out of his hand, and slit his throat. He fell to the ground, choking on his own blood. Two came running with bats. First, she ducked out of the way of one, tripped him, and stomped on his head. Then, spinning around, she drew her saber, sliced the other bat in half, and cut him through the gut. One drew his pistol, and unloaded it at her. She simply walked towards, ignoring the fire. He ran out of shots. She drew her own gun and fired it once. He slumped into a heap. I dashed outside.

"Weren't you afraid?"

"Why would I be afraid of such soft men? Besides, I have diplomatic invincibility. This is not my country."

"Sometimes I don't feel like it's mine either."

"Would you die for it?"

"... maybe."

"Would you or would you not? There is only dead or alive, no half-dead."

"Yeah."

"Then it is your country."

With that, Anna walked off into the night.

Donald Freeman would never finish his book on Napoleonic History. He enlisted in a colored regiment, and was killed in battle. He would not get his book. But his sacrifice would buy something much more valuable for millions of Americans: Freedom.

Anna walked through the night, an old song slipping through her lips.

Ich hatt' einen Kameraden, einen bessern findst du nicht.

It had been too long, far too long.

Die Trommel schlug zum Streite, er ging an meiner Seite in gleichem Schritt und Tritt.

But, her life had been full, and lived without fear of death. There was that. Soon enough, she would see them.

Eine Kugel kam geflogen: gilt's mir oder gilt es dir?

Especially her. How had she managed to live without her?

Sie hat ihn weggerissen, er liegt zu meinen Füßen als wär's ein Stück von mir.

Seward would take care of the mess. He was a good man. Curmudgeonly, yes. But who wouldn't be? People underestimated the diplomatic tangle that was happening between Britain and the US. A lesser diplomat would bring British intervention on the southern side. The country was rather beautiful. It was a shame war would soon ravage it.

Will mir die Hand noch reichen, derweil ich eben lad'.

A good comrade. The best comrade she could ever had. More than that, too. Family. She had never doubted her, had always believed and been supportive. More than she could say about her own treatment of her poor sister.

"Kann dir die Hand nicht geben, bleib du im ew'gen leben mein guter Kamerad!"

But it was time to sleep. A good comrade, she was. They would meet again in God's hands.

Liberty, Egalite, Fraternity

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Napoleon paced about repeatedly. At times, he would descend into wailing and sobbing, and mumble the name of Josephine. At other times, he would bury his head in his hands, a map of Europe rolled out before him. The island of Elba was run like a French Empire in miniature. The Elbans did not like authority. The island had seen many masters, none of them welcome. Napoleon was merely one in a long line of rulers that had imposed themselves on the island. Napoleon, followed by a small band of his Imperial Guard, put down the resistance. The taxes were high, and the people grumbled and moaned. Still, they paid. A thousand building projects were started, then abandoned as manpower proved insufficient and difficulties too great for Napoleon's ambition. The island of Elba was far too small a host for Napoleon's dreams, and the half-finished buildings littered the island, monuments to a still-lingering hunger for power.

Whenever foreign emissaries came over, Napoleon shaped up, especially when they were British. He was the picture of frankness and affability. He bore no ill will against his foes now. His only wish was a quiet retirement and peace for France. The emissaries let him be, and the soldiers were resupplied.

The Bourbons, though, still feared him. The Congress of Vienna rolled on, diplomats discussing and debating the new shape of Europe. Caving to pressure, it was decided to deal with Napoleon. Elba was too close to France, and the Bourbon hold too unsteady. Already, plans were being drawn up to send the Man of Destiny to St. Helena. There, he could be stripped of even the last pretenses of power he still had. Napoleon knew of this. He had hundreds of eyes and ears scattered around Europe. The loyalty he could command, even as his own powers waned, was staggering. In the end, the loyalty would be his immortality, and not his empire. It was clear now that he would either die, or take one last risk for glory.

Caesar would always cross the Rubicon. The Eagle readied himself to take his liberty.

I believe in the resurrection.

When the moon rose, so did the volume. The clattering roll of the drums would flare up, and the thudding of boots would fill the streets, drunk men rambling of lost freedoms. Each morning, as the sun rose to banish the night, Adam would stare into those empty cobbled streets with bloodshot eyes. The peasants were getting bolder, and nobody seemed to be doing a thing about it. Even La Marseilles was heard as the nights grew fierce with agitation. The Bourbon suppression had been inept. They had forced the Church back upon the people, failing to realize that God no longer spoke to their hearts. They had sliced the pay of the veterans in half, expecting to cow them. Instead, it had only stoked the fire in their hearts. Napoleon was now gone, exiled to Elba, but the Bourbons still feared him. The allowance granted to Napoleon in abdication was cut, then cut again. Perhaps they thought poverty could destroy a man where gunfire and bayonets had failed.

His brother approached, worry furrowing his brow. The eyes of the Duke of Orleans darted back and forth, and his legs twitched uneasily, as if waiting for foes to spring from every nook and cranny.

"How did you sleep, brother?" asked the Duke.

"What do you think?" replied Adam.

"Despicable, these rabble," said the Duke.

"The nobles are using their powers again."

"And rightly they should! We supported the revolution, and look how they treated us. Prisoners in our own homes."

"How is Belle?"

"The fever continues. She needs more rest."

"She won't be getting it."

"Excuse me?"

"You see the knitters knit, brother. We need to escape the city."

"Heavens preserve us, Adam, you're suggesting you leave everything behind for a few rabble-rousers?"

"I do. Give a taste of freedom to a man, and he will never forget it."

"We gave everything to the revolution."

"It doesn't matter."

"It should. It should!"

"The world isn't fair."

"Feh. Whatever happened to egalite?"

"It never was, and never will be. All they'll see is another set of nobles, and the streets will be stained with blood."

"Your wife is still ill."

"Better the fever than the guillotine."

The carriage trundled out of the city, rolling carefully over the roads. The wheels paced onto the stone, and did so with care and grace. Its destination was a small village in the French countryside. They had a manor there, and could hide while the storm raged on. The lonely houses lay there. Old faces peeked out, only slightly changed from the ones there many years ago. This little slice of rural life had not been touched by the Revolution. Here, perhaps, they could find peace.

The letter was burning a hole in Anna's pocket. It had been carefully ciphered, of course, and a spy would find nothing except for Anna's usual disjointed, half-coherent ramblings. Only Napoleon and those most loyal to him could crack the code.

Final preparations had been made. Anna had friends in high places, and it had been easy enough to corrupt the system. Obscure miscellany in the budget hid where the money was really going. She couldn't pull such a trick on Elsa, of course, but the Coronan system was much larger, and Rapunzel did not review the budgets as meticulously as Elsa did. A percent here, a shave there, a bit of overestimation there, and millions upon millions of marks could be embezzled out of the system into Anna's pockets, and from there, into the resupply and reconstitution of the army.

She continued to walk through the camp. She spotted Elsa, who was engaged in a little song and dance, sending sparks and wisps of snow flying about. The cast had finally come off. She tried not to make contact with the large, sad pools of Elsa's eyes. Even when Elsa was happy, those eyes were somber and restrained. Don't tell her anything, she said to herself. Don't show anything, she thought. If she asks about anything, make up something stupid and change the subject. It was of the utmost importance that Napoleon's wife not be informed until it was too late to change course. The invasion must go through as planned. It was their last real chance to seize victory and fulfill their dreams. Dreams were important. Dreams didn't die. It was only the trading of a minor, familial fraternity for a fraternity between all men. That was worth the sacrifice.

The letter changed hands. It was off, now. Detailed troop reports, supply locations, an itinerary planned by loyal Frenchmen, landing locations, and the laying out of a campaign. Strike at London. They had never ceased in their pursuit of Napoleon. Decapitate this most fervent of Coalition members, and the rest would allow Napoleon to reclaim his crown in peace.

March to the Sound of Guns: Interregnum

Even if you told the Queen that an entire province was in open revolt, she could probably laugh it off. Her own natural bubblyness had complemented the need for royal reserve, and it was difficult to deliver any news that could disturb Corona's sovereign. Even as the Congress of Vienna soured, with the powers looking to punish Corona for its siding with Napoleon, Rapunzel remained cheerful. The situation was recoverable. Annex a few of the allied northern states, and the territory loss would be compensated for. Besides, everything was accounted for. Later historians would consider how Alexander I essentially saved Corona at the Congress, and secured the alliance far into the future.

When the courier broke this piece of news, though, Rapunzel's jaw dropped. Her eyes narrowed to tiny dots, her jaw clenched ever so slightly, and for the briefest of instants, you could even see the nibbling of mice as they ate their meals of dust in the castle walls. Before anyone could react, though, her eyes returned to their normal fullness and she gave her orders with a simple wave. Recall Blucher from retirement. Rally the remaining loyal troops. Send the Kingdom Guards to remove suspicious persons, no knocking. Bureaucrats found to have participated in the conspiracy would be purged softly, transferred to distant backwaters.

Blucher was riding off within the day. A grin was spreading across the old man's face. He saw himself on a grassy field, personally executing Napoleon. It was enough to feed energy back into old bones. So the old hound was dispatched to bring the young one to heel.

"Use the troops to gently persuade my wayward cousin into taking her proper place."

The orders were clear as day. The Coronans marched west, towards destiny. Towards the Man of Destiny. The Sun would melt the wax

from the Eagle's wings.

Failure was no longer an option. What would Rapunzel do if she caught her? Execution for treason? Imprisonment for life?

The fact that her sister had come along without even a second thought was little comfort. She was abusing her trust.

What was she to do, though? Elsa was an integral part of the plan. Love was putting someone else's needs above her own. She needed Elsa, but the world needed Napoleon. The world needed the French Revolution. Already, the nations of Europe were trying to revert all of the progress made in those twenty years of blood. Someone had to stop them.

Then again, she might not even know what love is.

The route had been carefully plotted to include bastions of Bonapartist support. Across the country, fleur-de-lisles and white banners were torn down from church spires and town halls, replaced by the tricolor. The Bourbons had taken countermeasures. The army and bureaucracy had been forced to swear new loyalty oaths to the monarchy. Many officers had been purged, replaced with men whose only qualification was the ability to toady. It was not enough.

Napoleon was a masterful propagandist, and he proceeded to paint himself as a tired man drawn back into the service of his homeland and the republic, one under attack by foreign influences and a puppet monarchy. He landed in the south of France with a thousand of his most elite guards, and marched north. Along the way, old soldiers and fervent young men flocked to his banner. Crowds tore down gates for him, and festooned the roads of France with symbols of devotion. The Eagle had returned. In Lyons, Anna arrived with 45,000 Coronan troops, ready to fight for the Emperor. The French army was sent to deal with Napoleon. Unfortunately for the hapless Bourbons, their purge had not been thorough enough. General Lessard had been in contact with Napoleon, and when Napoleon

saw the royalist army, he tore off his coat and bared his chest, daring any man to kill him if that was their will. The soldiers broke into a charge, but they did not do so with bayonets. Instead, it was a great weeping happiness that they brought to bear, and they hugged and kissed their returned Emperor. Ney had promised to bring Napoleon back to the King in a cage, but faced with such Bonapartist support, he abandoned the monarchy and rallied to Napoleon's banner.

Still, the return should have been put down. If the Bourbons had been more able, they could have deployed troops to the south of France immediately, troops with thoroughly checked loyalty, and killed Napoleon before he could perform his propaganda coups. Now, faced with collapsing support, the Bourbons fled. France was Napoleon's once more.

It was not a certain thing, though. Napoleon had gained a great deal of support by claiming to be the Revolution's son, but the Bourbons had implemented their own liberal constitution. As such, Napoleon had to create his own, one even more liberal. Of course, he had no intention of following it, but the very existence of the document fettered him. In royalist strongholds, civil war broke out once again, as it had more than a decade prior. Troops could not be spared to put down the revolts. It was of the utmost importance that the plan be followed. The army would strike north decisively. North was the direction of victory. Support was warm, but only just. Everyone knew that Napoleon's return meant further war, and the citizens of France were tired. The blood of millions had watered the fields of Europe, and France had seen generations disappear into the gunsmoke of war. Local governments retained their royalist officials, and peaceful resistance began to sap the French income and manpower.

In truth, it was probably an impossible dream. Even if they had won Waterloo and knocked Britain out of the war, the entire world had turned against Napoleon. He had been painted as a tiny mockery of a man, with only bloodlust and ambition flowing in his veins. He would have to conquer all of Europe again just to have peace.

One last time, though, the Eagle would fly. The Man of Destiny had returned.

Man versus Man

The Napoleonic Wars had already had abnormally high casualty rates for the period. Elsa had erred, and she did not even realize it. Routs were now complicated by sticky flames covering exits, ice walls blocking off retreats, clouds of still dissipating chemicals, and the pursuit of untiring, unerring icy demons. Rout just became another path to a horrific death. When all options lead to death, and the only chance of victory is through combat, then fight they shall. Elsa had been trained in many aspects of statecraft, but perhaps her own aversion to harming others for any reason had caused her to neglect her studies in war. Inadvertently, all battles had become battles on death ground. In the Napoleonic Wars, there was no retreat and no surrender, only glorious death in battle. Of all those battles, Waterloo would be by far the deadliest. Four out of every five men sent would never go home again.

The sun loomed large over the battle to come. Anna breathed in the crisp air, and smelled the salt starting to waft in. The sea was getting closer. The furthest elements of army still trailed behind. At the moment, they were in a small village to the rear. The name of it? Waterloo. The name was insignificant, of course. It barely hung in Anna's subconscious, and even then, by the barest of threads. Her sister's soft fingers curled outwards, frost trailing from them. Snow golems were being created at a rate of 125 per minute. That's more than two per second. Years ago, it would take whole seconds just to create one snow golem. Now Elsa was capable of recreating Paris, population and all, in only three days.

She looked up at the sun again. How much had it moved? It had to be tracked carefully, the shadows had traced. What she would do for a good watch. Probably kill, it was one of the only things she was good at. Things had to be done. Napoleon spent much of his time staring at maps, and raging at the sun now. He no longer dictated orders, he waited on consul. It was regrettable. Columns had to be kept in perfect marching order, and coordinated as to not run into

each other. The path was carefully set. Of course, the plan would not last forever. Ideally, though, it would last long enough. The sea grew nearer.

A rider came, breath racing ahead of his body like a charger. He arrived, and then he caught his breath. There was dire news. The enemy had raised a new coalition, and their forces had just impacted on the rear, near Waterloo.

And now, the time had already slipped away. Anna turned her horse around, and motioned for her sister to follow.

"Elsa? Activate it," said Anna.

Elsa nodded mutely, and turned her hands groundward. Ice began to slick the Belgian earth. Across the field, ice walls formed. The most massive separated the forward force from the remainder of the army, and the enemy. The snow rose up, forming into a maze with a radius of 40 miles. Blind walls and unending corridors formed, with no exits or entrances in sight. Those would come later. They continued their ride.

There was Waterloo, savaged by war. Marshal Ney was holding the defensive position with a rearguard, as the enemy force struggled to take the hills. Still, he would be swamped by men. Scouts were taking the strength of the enemy. Here, the British had finally committed to the war in full force. Of course, their army was not large to begin with, and it was stretched across the globe. Despite holding much of the world in their grasp, the British army was only as large as the Coronan one at full strength. Notions of British rights, and a lack of the same warrior spirit that animated the Coronan mindset, plus a belief that it was unseemly, kept conscription off the British table for the Napoleonic Wars. A full fifth of the British army was composed of foreign recruits. This meant that even the full commitment made here was only 80,000 men. They were outnumbered by even their own assorted allies. There were more Spanish there than British. There were more Portuguese than British. There were more assorted Germans than British. There were

certainly more Austrians than British. Even the small force of 40,000 that had arrived with Blucher compared favorably to the British size. Still, the British had a way of controlling the narrative, and over time, they would become known as the deciding force at Waterloo, and eventually the whole war.

Immediately, snow golem reinforcements began to bolster the French line. Ice blasts fell into the enemy lines, and ice spikes disrupted their formations. Icy angels buzzed with activity, diving again and again towards the Coalition forces. Now the enemies of Napoleon came underneath a continuous bombardment. Paths forward were suddenly blocked off by ice. The field was made treacherous with rough and smooth ice. A storm was formed over them, disturbing vision and chilling them to the bone. Anna listened for the breaking of trees and splintering of wood. She listened for the soft thuds and blasting apart of bodies. There was much of that. Fire had scarcely touched the battle, though. A few golems went down, here and there, collapsing into clouds of steam, but most of the munitions used were conventional. Every time, they were careful to find the range and pinpoint the exact location of the shot using many normal cannonballs before using fire. It was clear that they were conserving their incendiaries, and likely were short on them. Just as planned.

Still, the French line would be overrun. The mass of the enemy was simply too great. The Coalition pressed forward simply on the mass of its bodies. Human wave tactics were brutal and thuggish, but they were yielding fruit that day. Behind them, the maze grew upwards. Stairs connected the previously isolated paths, and an intricate web was woven, with passages going up and down and up again, and a circuitous road was forged going through the citadel. Defenses and positions were laid down. Marshal Ney prepared to hold with a few last men before the village of Waterloo was completely compromised. The rest of the French retreated to the icy fortress. If the Coalition wished to advance further, they would have to raid the newly formed Waterloo Citadel.

Blucher was indeed conserving incendiaries. His plan was simple. Break the village with sheer manpower, then force through the citadel using fire, ignoring all the prepared defenses and traps undoubtedly guarding the walls. Walking along the corridors would give no chance of survival if they suddenly burst into spikes, or the walls came and crushed them, or a golem confronted a small group of men head on. One line, burning clear through, like a spear through the heart of a witch, or a gunshot into the head of a tyrant that had lived far too long. Blucher smiled.

Anna made her retreat into the castle, sister coming along. They passed through an endless procession of doors. Along the way, they confronted a group of enemy infantry, stragglers from a battalion now completely devastated. Her sister was already reeling internally from having to channel so much power, and channel it towards destructive ends. Anna would deal with them personally. There were only 25 of them. Not a big problem. One of them was barking out orders in an angry voice, and they rushed at her. Their shots, panicked and unsteady, either missed, or dealt blows that were grazing at best. In melee, they were clumsy and slow, and she cut them up with grace, power, and elegance. The enemy leader was studying her, looking for a pattern to her actions that could be exploited. That was a problem. She suddenly switched her style of combat, and stymied his plans. One by one, they fell. She resisted the urge to shout something out as each of them died. Soon enough, the meager band of 25 had been wiped out. There was no time to rest. More would be coming.

They arrived at the shore, and Anna saw what her sister had wrought. Already, many of the French forces were on the ice. This was the plan, to march straight across the ocean. British naval superiority was now irrelevant. They would storm London by land. Across the sea, mothers held their children nervously, and fathers hacked desperately at the earth, trying to break the frost that now held the Thames in its grip. It was no good. Elsa was creating a path straight to London, and the French would take the city in conventional battle. Anna began to direct the stream of men as they

poured onto the ice. Bit by bit, Napoleon's army surged towards England. Finally, it was time for them to cross. Anna kicked her horse, and it stirred to life. Its hooves touched ice.

And then the air was blasted from her lungs, and the horse was running off, and the sharp crack was drowning out everything, and she was falling to the earth, droplets of blood floating through the air, as time froze.

From the top, maestro. Play it again.

Man versus Self

He could see the battle in his mind's eye, and see it with the clarity of an eagle in flight.

Could he manipulate it still? The columns were ossified, and refused to yield to his commands. The field returned to its original shape each time he pressed it, a liquid, roiling thing.

What would happen to him if he failed? Perhaps an escape to America could be made. They would welcome him with open arms.

Forward, they had to press forward. More ground had to be seized. Strike with momentum and power. He had said that once, he was sure. Use the mass to your advantage.

The goal? Peace, perhaps. Maybe power. Who really knew these days?

He had listened to the planning. It was a good plan, most likely. Neutralizing enemy advantages was important.

Sometimes the voices were unfamiliar. Each passing day made the faces less familiar. Where were his old marshals?

Had it all been for this?

He loved his son. He had never seen his son. He ought to. There were a lot of things he ought to do.

His horse carried him ahead.

Where was the maneuver, the unquenchable brilliance of battle? Again, the future fell back into its slovenly shape, two bruisers, two sides, slogging at each other, a pointless battle of Olympians.

His face was wet, and he wiped it off.

He was fat, but no longer a hungry man.

So many people had been loyal to him. They were loyal still, were they not?

In the distance, he heard cannons thunder. The battle had begun.

The maze was growing, forming into a great towering thing. His advisers had told him it would form, in their ceaseless babbling. It was good. Even if he fell here, Europe would look upon it and remember. They would remember the man who had laid them low again and again.

The march back had been a great propaganda coup, but it shouldn't have been propaganda. All Frenchmen should have clamored for him. What was the sea of indifference that now swirled around him?

Yes, memories. He would leave a legacy worth remembering. Paris was the city of lights he had promised, wasn't it? Maybe. Maybe not.

Image mattered. Napoleon kept his image impeccable. Defeat might mar that image.

Only eight of his marshals had rallied to him. The others had forgotten him, or were dead.

It had to be perfect. Perfection was impossible. The perfect was the enemy of the good. By striving for perfection, Napoleon could no longer act in a manner merely good. His legacy had now overshadowed him.

Was his glory lost in a great sea of indifference? The people did not praise his name as they did before.

Had he really returned from Elba?

A thousand half-finished projects littered the shores of that tiny land.

Were his improvements that much better here? Who knew what could stand the test of time?

He could. He would. They would remember his name, he was sure.

If only Josephine had lived.

He had never been perfect. He had to scheme his way into power. His victories were great, true, but they could always be better. Everything could always be better.

For the first time in forever, Napoleon was small.

Josephine! Where was she in his hour of need? The sun had been put out, and the moon was a poor substitute. It could only reflect the splendor of the sun.

Forward, always forward. His horse kept up the steady pace. A conqueror was like a cannonball.

Ahead, the citadel loomed large, reaching one defiant hand into the heavens.

He climbed. He reached the top. He saw.

He saw the jewel-encrusted sea, as it was transmuted from glittering sapphire to iridescent diamond. The swarm of tiny men flowed onto it, a film of oil gleaming o'er the sea. The sky stretched out above him, begging him to spread his wings and fly. The blue was above him, the blue was below. The ice made great bands of white across the world, a monument of some kind, though he knew not to what. Hundreds of thousands had arrived to oppose him, and yet they strived in vain. Their bodies lay crumpled and broken along the fields, blood staining the grass a dark red. Red, blue, and white, the tricolor of France. He felt his blood boil at the notion. First Britain, then he would bring the continent back into his system. Then what? He would make himself the better of Alexander. The ancients had conquered much, but they had not faced so many empires as mighty

as their own. He would march across the Hellespont, he would destroy the Ottoman Empire. From there, he would go beyond and seize India, conquer Cathay. The world was already falling into his pocket.

He had risen from nothing before, hadn't he? Who would've guessed the tiny and unimpressive corporal would become a great man? Whiff of grapeshot. Just one of the legends he had fabricated full cloth to facilitate his rise to power. He could weave miracles from nothing, and crushing victories from ashes and dust. From humble Corsica, he had come to rule all of France. Citizen-Emperor, that was he. He had become Consul, destroyed his triumvirate, foiled his Brutuses, and there were dozens of those Brutuses, and built an empire over all Europe, and he had done it starting from nothing. At age 30, he had come to rule an entire country, and by 40, he had defeated all the great nations of Europe several times. There was still time. He was still young. He stretched out his hand, and cupped the distant sun in his palm.

I am become myself again, he thought.

Footsteps rang down the citadel, Napoleon's legs flurrying with speed. He came to the shore, and rejoiced. They would need him to lead them. He would set the example. Atop his horse, the mighty and brilliant general once more, he would guide them into the future.

The soldiers marched on, and Napoleon kept up his stately bearing.

Then the sound of gunfire broke the steady rhythm of the march. Napoleon heard a high-pitched scream from behind, followed by a sharp cracking and splintering, the noise of a billion wine glasses falling to the ground at once, the noise of a glass cathedral smitten by an angry god. The ice blanketing the sea, seemingly sheer and impenetrable, began to crack and melt. Then, the world dissolved into an ashy white cloud, the torrential sound of avalanche drowning out anything else.

From the top, maestro. Play it again.

Man versus Nature

Dew blessed the grasses of Waterloo, tiny spheres filled with all the promise and love a fresh field could provide. Franz's pack was heavy with supplies, the sundries of life. This was it, the day when Napoleon's evil empire would come crashing down once and for all. His ambition had already been dealt a mortal wound at Leipzig. This was just the execution.

Franz paused to look over the rolling greenery. It was pleasant, with a breeze passing by that was slightly chill, but not uncomfortably so. Birds chirped cheerfully, and the vultures flew overhead with pleasant, forgiving gazes. Snowflakes were falling, and Franz caught one on his tongue, savoring the brief instant of snowmelt on his tongue.

They had formed into rows. It was time.

Across the field, cannons were rolled up into a grand battery.

His unit was being deployed alongside several Sardinians, led by the King's brother, Charles Felix Philip di Savoia. It was a peculiar name, but a prophetic one, as one had to go back hundreds of years to find a Philip in the Savoyan line, and hundreds of years further back still to find the originator, a prince of Arles in a long lost age of Karlings and dead Kingdoms, a dynastic history that now only existed in a meaningful sense in the female line, one of many bloodlines to have fed into the House of Savoy. But, this little droplet was enough. In the Kings of Italy was the legacy of a man who destroyed an evil sorceress and broke a briary curse. In every noble house, there was a kind of legacy like it, for nobility does not spring from the earth fully formed. It is born from knights and heroes, those who do great service or seize power with their own raw hands. This is the legacy of their blood. Every house has a founder.

Franz knew none of this. Not even the House of Savoy knew, for almost a thousand years of time will weather any ancient legend. Still, he was at ease.

The lines advanced, and cannon fire began to tear into them. To the side, a man's limbs were blown clean off, the torso and head flopping lazily in the air, carried off by a cannonball. The row would mitigate much of the damage, though, and only that one man had been ended by that one shot. Another blast, and one man was liquefied within his jacket. Dazed and shocked, he opened his jacket, only to collapse into a puddle of bloody mush. Little by little, his unit was being reduced.

His muddy boots rose, and then stamped into the ground again and again. This was the march forward. It was taken one step at a time, as bullets riddled the air and cannon made its fearful blustering known. Is there any wonder that soldiers break and rout? It is a testament to human courage that men will advance to their deaths without complaint.

They were getting closer. Of course, their foe was now reinforcing their position. Vicious thorns and briars grew unto the battlefield, tearing apart feet as easily as they did boots. Vile snowy automatons took the field, rushing into their lines and dealing icy death before they melted away. The men did not break. Their shield was virtue, their sword was truth. Their general rode with them, unbowed by any shows of wicked sorcery.

A host of unholy angels flew towards them, but they did not falter. At the head was a great beast of myth, an ice dragon to rival any creature of old. Its fearsome wingspan stretched across the sky, blotting it out. It let loose a single breath, and 500 men were suddenly frozen solid. It swiped a claw across the line, tearing entrails out. Single, gasping breaths were made by already dead men, as they gazed upon their own innards laid out before them. It crushed heads beneath its fearsome talons.

Charles Felix did what came naturally to his blood. He threw his weapon. Of course, advancements in technology had made that not an incredibly stupid idea. You see, his sword of truth was actually a flamethrower of werfing flammen. His weapon was fire, and the fire was thrown, and it struck the beast's heart. The dragon screamed, a high-pitched wailing lament, as she began to dissolve. The flames clung to her, ravaging the body, and if the dragon fell into the line, they would burn the men to cinders. So Charles Felix did what came naturally to his blood, again. He threw his other weapon. The sword hurtled through the air in its fateful journey, and struck the dragon in the face, hilt-first. This little bit of mass probably didn't do anything. But the dragon fell backwards, slain. Cheers went up from the line, and they continued their forward march.

Faced with such an unerring advance, the French began to abandon their positions. Their defenses could not hold against a heroic and noble advance.

The French now retreated into their thorny, spiky death fortress of doom, the citadel cutting an imposing figure over the fields of Waterloo. But even a cursed castle like that could not stop the attacks of righteous men, led by a charming Prince.

They opened up their flamethrowers, and began to push through the citadel.

Hairline imperfections and tiny other lines covered the corridors, the blood vessels of a leviathan. His heartbeat faded away, becoming one with the beating heart of the citadel. It howled in pain, the metallic groaning and straining of pillars no longer able to support the weight above them, as support columns were forcibly melted away. It was a living creature, the body of a malevolent sorceress. One wrong move, and everyone would be crushed into flesh paste. He had seen it happen already. One private, overeager, stepped forward too fast. The citadel had twitched, and an ice wall had slammed into him, leaving nothing left. Franz held a flamethrower now. The last man to hold it had suddenly been impaled by spikes of

ice bursting out of the floor. The further they penetrated, the purpler and redder the ice became.

Attrition was a funny word for dead men. A booby-trapped chandelier here, a corridor with an angry snow golem there, French hiding behind a dead corner. The unit melted away. His fuel reserves melted away. Franz stole a glance at his fuel gauge, and noted the distressing news. It was gone. The clicking and furtive empty noises of his weapon as he attempted to fire it confirmed the meter's dread proclamation. He took up a dead comrade's musket. He still had his own bullets.

There was much distance to go, but it was no longer a straight line there. The path would now go up, along endless twisting mazes and stairwells.

But Franz was pure of heart, and such an airy and divine spirit was naturally drawn skywards. All the briar thorns and deadly traps of Waterloo Citadel could not stop him.

He climbed.

And when he reached the top, all the kingdoms of the world were laid before him, in their wondrous riches. He saw the nations of Earth from his aerie towering above the world. These delights were not for him. He was a small man, a small-town boy, and needed only his duty. His eyes darted about, and found their target. He prayed for a shot to defeat the ice witch, and fired.

The bullet was carried forth by the Austrian winds.

Impact, a bite into flesh.

He cut off da capo, and the witch's song repeated no more. The eternal curse was broken, and time would repeat no more. The world crawled forward, the stasis of winter's grip no longer chaining its sleeping beauty.

The citadel cracked and crumbled to dust. The floor gave way beneath him. He fell, impaled ankle to pelvis by a ice spike before that too melted away.

Author Notes : I am aware that there is a line pinpointing Sleeping Beauty in the 1300s. However, Counts of Savoy sounds much less dignified than Kings of Arles, even if it is more accurate. We could assume that it was a minor error, and that 14th century was actually meant to refer to the 1400s, but the Duchy of Savoy still sounds less impressive than the Kingdom of Arles, even if we do have the succession of the two Phils.

Man versus God

God is dead.

The bullet tore through Anna's body, shredding flesh into stringy bits and crunching bone apart. Her arm was reduced to a pulpy, torn up mess, with long globs of meat barely dangling by sinews and tendons, blood leaking from severed vessels.

Elsa's fragmented consciousness, spread thin over a thousand square miles of unending snowstorm, snapped back into focus, the high-pitched scream ripping her out of the magical trance. Summer snows were not meant to be. The great crystalline tower, which scraped the heavens and challenged the sky, came tumbling down with a sharp crack. The swirling, twisting power came to a total still, snowflakes hanging in mid-air. The remnants of the tower were falling all around, disintegrating into a giant cloud of snow, blotting out the entire world before falling to the earth and melting into nonexistence.

And God said nothing.

The snow blew back inwards, coalesced onto Elsa, and then stopped. Her sister was lying there. Elsa lazily tumbled off her horse, and hit the ground. She steadied herself, and stood up again. Then, she took stilted, stumbling steps towards her sister, mucus and watery blockage building deep in her throat, choking gasps replacing normal breaths of air. Her tears were thick with salt, and they stung at the cold softness of her face. Her lumbering gait brought her to Anna, and she fell onto her knees, burying her head in Anna's body, the wracking sobs finding full release.

Elsa pressed her head against Anna's chest, and felt the flickering heartbeats. It was impossible that her sister was so fragile. It couldn't end like this. Anna had defied the country for her. Anna had fought the world. Anna could beat anyone, couldn't she? One measly bullet

was all it took. That wasn't right. That wasn't proper. Anna's chest heaved beneath Elsa, and her sister coughed up a goblet of blood.

"Elsa..." came the whisper. "You have to... have... to..."

"Have to what?" asked Elsa.

"St... sta... staunch the bleeding. Freeze my arm... now... not... no time."

Elsa lifted her head, and looked at her ungloved hands. Visions of frozen heads and hearts raced through her eyes, but she pulled them away. There was danger there, but danger never came without power. She caressed the mangled stump, and the power came. Sparks danced up the grisly wounds and over Anna's hair, turning a streak white. The strands of flesh frosted over, then froze solid. The blood was sealed away behind a dam of ice. Elsa looked into her sister's eyes. They were dull and glassy, but not yet dead. The light was dim, ever so dim, within them. She stopped the magic. Tendrils and fingers of frost continued to grow from the frozen stump, slowly creeping towards Anna's chest, blackening and destroying whatever they touched.

"Please Anna... you can't die on me. Don't leave me alone again. I don't want to be alone," said Elsa.

"Shhh... shhhhh... can't kill me that easily. Get... on the horse. Have to move... move fast. Speed... key," replied Anna.

Elsa tugged at Anna, straining to carry the weight. She doubled up on force, then doubled again. Her legs began to feel acid burn. Her arms were tearing with the exertion. She was wheezing and hacking and coughing, and then she felt Anna leave the ground, as the sweat poured into her eyes, blurring and obscuring the world, and burning her eyes. With one final push, she boosted Anna onto the horse, and climbed onto the saddle.

"Anna, don't give up, keep fighting. Stay with me, you have to!" whispered Elsa.

"Won't... won't give up... you know I never... never do," said Anna.

"I can't be alone again. You're all I have left. You're the world to me."

"Never... alone. I... was always there... outside the door... keep going... find fire... has to still be... burning... ride."

Elsa kicked her horse into motion, and they rode through the dripping ruins of the citadel. Off in the distance, she spotted a patch of still-burning Greek Fire, and turned to ride towards it. The great beast thundered beneath them, roiling muscles pumping away with frenetic force, propelling them across the field. The day was filled with the music of screams, a chorus of the suffering dead.

"Elsa... were we the good guys or the bad guys?" asked Anna.

"I don't know, Anna. I don't know what to believe anymore," replied Elsa.

"I believe in you. Do you believe in me?"

"Yes, yes I do. What else is there? The world's gone mad, absolutely mad!"

Anna was caught up in another coughing fit. The ice continued to spread, reaching away from her destroyed arm.

"Then... then that's fine... I think that's enough," said Anna.

Storm clouds were gathering above, and the sky was darkening. The unnatural grip of winter had ended. Elsa rode on, towards the distant flames. They rode on through the sea of corpses.

"What do you think heaven is like?" asked Anna.

"Snow. There's snow everywhere, and carrots, and little bits of coal, and buttons, and our parents, and so much snow. Snow to build a million snowmen with. Not yet Anna, not yet. You can't go alone."

"It... sounds nice. Sounds very nice."

"I want to go too, but not yet."

"I want to build a happy snowman."

"We'll build one, Anna! Together, we'll go together. Hold on a little longer, you have to!"

They came to the fire. It was saluted by the burning flags of Sardinia and France, and the burnt out husk of a supply wagon, a leering skull of a thing with ribs of iron and a grinning mockery replacing the water it used to hold. Elsa descended the horse, and gingerly set Anna down on the ground. The sun was setting, and the clouds were gathering swiftly. The world had been tinted a blood red, stained by the life of dying horses as Apollo's chariot fell to earth.

"We're here Anna, what do I do now?" asked Elsa.

"Take my sword... put it... in the fire. Heat it white-hot."

Anna stared at the fire, the light reflecting off her shimmering eyes. The fire was rising. Elsa took the sheath, and pulled the sword out, cringing at the scraping of its steel against the scabbard. It was howling for blood. She stared at it for a moment, then placed it in the fire. It began to glow, hotter and brighter. First red. Then, it came to a glowing white.

"Chop my arm off, Elsa," said Anna.

Elsa looked at Anna, then looked at the sword.

"Anna... I can't! I can't do this!" said Elsa with a plaintive cry.

"Give me the sword," said Anna.

Anna took the sword in her good hand, and brought it down sharply onto her stump of an other arm. She screamed in pain, and then whimpered softly as the pain shook her body. The heat sizzled at the flesh, charring it a dark black. She lifted the sword, and brought it down again. The chop seared the flesh, and smoke came out. Anna screamed again, and her hand opened, letting the sword drop to the ground. She cried, was crying, and her soft whining cries contrasted harshly against the scarlet sky. Elsa tried to look away, but couldn't. She was staring. Then her fists balled up, and her mouth clenched.

"I'm taking the sword, Anna," she said.

She could do this. She was strong. She had to be strong. She couldn't look away. This was it. She grabbed the sword. She wouldn't pull any punches. She had to drive it through. She lifted the sword. A clean cut. A powerful cut. It had to be done.

The sword came down.

With a final, wailing cry, the sword burned through the last bits of flesh and bone, the scorching heat overcoming the weakness of the body. The fingers and tendrils of ice had been denied, and their carrion feast would not be coming this day. The arm came loose, and was detached. The fire continued its burning.

Elsa pulled the sword away, and then dropped it on the ground. She looked up to the skies, now a dark gray. The rain began to fall, the weeping of Dionysus as the revels came to an end. She kneeled down near her sister once again.

Elsa pulled her sister, pressing their bodies together. Her arms locked into a tight embrace. Anna mumbled something, then closed her eyes. The rain came pouring down. The fire refused to yield, and burned on. Elsa brushed her sister's hair with her hands, ignoring the grime. Anna's hair was smooth and slicked with blood and rainwater. She felt Anna's breath against her neck. These were the small things. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.

There they were, two hearts, beating in unison, under the auspices of an unknown and silent God.

END OF PART ONE

MAN: INTERLUDE: END OF PART ONE

" It is the music of a people that are climbing to the light!" - Les Miserables

" In 1750s Arendelle, roughly 165 children would die of smallpox out of every 1000 baptisms... by 1850, life expectancy had more than doubled... GDP had increased astronomically..." - History of the Arendelle Industrial Revolution, Vol I

" The Great Escape of this book is the story of mankind's escaping from deprivation and early death, of how people have managed to make their lives better, and led the way for others to follow." - Angus Deaton, The Great Escape

"The press, the machine, the railway, the telegraph are premises whose thousand-year conclusion no one has yet dared to draw." - Friedrich Nietzsche

"If I was not a Queen, then God would have seen fit to make an architect. If my mother was not a Queen, then she would seized God by his coattails and become a capitalist." - Elsa II Maria Hohenzollern

"Let us don our masks and sing of lies,

the owl hoots and the ermine cries,

we'll hurry through o'er the frozen bog

and I'll kiss you, my love, in the poison smog."

- Stanza from "The Poison Smog", a traditional love song of 19th and early 20th century Arendelle

God was dead.

The shattered fragments of him laid all over Europe.

Man does not give up.

Man wants to believe, if he cannot.

When God is dead, build a new God.

One chapter closed, one written with blood.

Soon, another would open, one written with iron.

For now, Europe slept. For the first time in forever, it had peace. The snowflakes dusted the earth lightly, and the slightest tread of feet might disturb them.

Europe dreamed.

It dreamed of shimmering steel towers climbing to fight the sun.

It dreamed of wars, great and terrible, wars that hoped to end all wars but never could.

It dreamed of the reaper cast away at last, and of children sleeping soundly in cribs.

It dreamed of distances conquered and the world made small and cozy.

It dreamed of food, of families that could finally eat of more than ashes and tears.

It dreamed of freedom and tyranny, two sapphic lovers caught in kissing embrace.

It dreamed of unity and death.

It dreamed of monsters that dressed as men, and men that dressed as monsters.

It dreamed of the dead piled high above the heavens, bloated corpses grinning lazily.

It dreamed of poisons deadly quick, poisons quick enough to slay disease and mosquito swarms.

It dreamed of things tiny beyond comprehension, and of splitting the world with fire.

It dreamed of life.

It dreamed of unimaginable prosperity.

It dreamed of iron, iron that could think and move, iron to free man from his chains.

It dreamed of belching smokestacks and rivers that ran with milk, honey, and chemical runoff.

It dreamed of colossi locked against each other.

It dreamed of dancing.

It dreamed that God would be forgiving.

The world had changed. It would never be the same again. The Pandora's box was open.

At the bottom of every Pandora's box is hope.

And Elsa picked up the hammer. God was dead.

It was time to build a new God.

Like a bolt out of the blue, fate steps in and sees you through. When you wish upon a star, your dreams come true.

BEGINNING OF INTERLUDE.

Mother: Interlude

3,700 dead, most of them in rural areas.

300,000 dead, in a circle of death reaching around the Baltic.

Bad things happened without control. Her powers had grown. They would only continue to grow.

The same was true with rule. Every move had to be well-calculated and precise. Her powers, both magical and temporal, were capable of inflicting great harm as well as causing great good. Kill no one if it should not be done. If mercy leads to tragedy, never stay the hand of wrath. Be feared, but be loved as well. Her ice had killed over 1.2 million people in the Napoleonic Wars. However, it was also giving a tangible benefit to the Arendelle economy. 24 vereinsthalers, 19 silbergroschen and 3 pfennig for every man, woman, and child in Arendelle every year from the export of ice. It wasn't distributed that way, of course. It all fed into the state's coffers, part of an ambitious new industrialization plan. If sent to the people, it would greatly assist them. Families could be fed, new clothing could be bought, life could be improved somewhat. Millions and millions of tons of Arendelle ice could be exported every year with almost zero production cost. But give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Build a fish cannery, and you feed his family for generations. She had bigger plans in mind.

The ice money would be the capital injection needed to industrialize Arendelle. Sulfurous acid, caustic soda, sodium sulfide, potash. These would be the future. With factories would come the relocation of the population. Rural parishes would be stripped of population and merged into the cities. This would allow the reduction of distant staffs and reallocation of resources. The bureaucracy would be modernized and centralized. For too long, the most distant edges of the realm had failed to yield to the royal yoke. There were Sami tribes out there that had lived in isolation for hundreds of years. But

nobody really wanted to be alone, right? Besides, it was for their own good. There was a technique, variolation, that was very expensive, but reduced chances of death tenfold. Rumors were spreading from London of an even better technique to fight smallpox, one involving cows and hot pokers and other such nonsense. With her grasp extended firmly over the country, she could make comprehensive and decisive policy movements. The tax base would widen, and the population would increase.

Elsa continued to pore over her reports. Sven looked over her shoulder, nodding approvingly at times. Kristoff stood to the side, exasperated and half-asleep. A dripping of wax, and then the stamping of the royal seal, and a plan could be set in motion. One wrong move and everyone could die. But Elsa had learned to balance caution and risk. She just had to be careful and focus. Read every report carefully, look for inconsistencies, analyze the data, and propose a plan of action. Her powers could be used to set things in motion, but she refused to use them to maintain things. Construction was acceptable, but she would not be part of the industrial apparatus.

After all, some day she would be gone. She had seen too many dead men to entertain illusions of immortality. When she died, it was imperative that Arendelle live on. She shuffled notes around, and straightened another set of papers.

One of these reports was not right. The quantity could not possibly be correct. Only three foundries in France could turn out that sort of output, and she knew all three. None of them was owned by the company on the paper. Yet it had been stamped with an official seal, albeit one of the old Napoleonic ones, although those had still been in use on other messages from France, and the way in which it was written was completely correct. There was a very clever forger loose in the system. Who could've possibly done such a thing? It could be a palace member, slipping it in directly. The secret police would have to search everyone, and do so quickly. An assassin could be present even now. Whoever slipped such a convincing forgery into her

papers was sending a clear and dangerous message. Perhaps it was the bureaucracy. A widespread infection by foreign agents could paralyze the country at any time. Dossiers would be checked, backgrounds would be scanned again. Some of the bureaucrats had been appointed by her father. His vetting system was woefully inadequate. She lowered the report and looked over her desk.

There was a small boy waiting there.

"The French Empire formally requests that Arendelle end its hug embargo and accept our exports of love," said the young Napoleon II, seal of the French Empire in hand.

Elsa stared over, heart confused. She pushed the chair back with her arm, got up, and made a few wooden steps over. She picked her son up and squeezed him tight. Elsa cried.

She had become her father in the end.

"Can an old soldier still love?" asked Anna.

"Let's find out," said Kristoff.

Anna drew a knife. She cut her own finger, then licked the knife. She savored the taste carefully, eyeing Kristoff hungrily.

"I could kill you, you know. It would be easy. I could... drive the knife into your brain. Take the garotte out, strangle you. Snap that cuddly neck of yours. Shoot you, you would be bleeding out on the floor. It would be easy... so easy," she murmured, planting a kiss on his neck.

"You're a crazy bitch, Anna."

"I am a crazy bitch," said Anna.

Anna began to strut towards Kristoff, hips swaying wide. She pushed him backwards, and he tumbled onto the bed.

"The female wolf... is a bitch. I'm hungry, Kristoff," said Anna.

"I've had practice dealing with wolves. When I was a kid, they'd chase me way up trees and keep me there. I lived."

"You've never met a wolf like me. Now I'm circling your tree," she whispered.

Her hand went low, started to unbutton his pants. Kristoff's big, burly hands wrapped around Anna's waist.

They fucked.

Through the window, young Olaf and snow Olaf were watching.

"Wow, I didn't know carrots could be so big! And so pale too, I thought they were usually orange," said snow Olaf.

"Olaf, I wub you. Show me more cool things!" said the boy Olaf.

"Oh wow, now they're doing the impaling thing. I didn't know you could do that if you had bones."

Years of combat had honed Anna's senses. She could smell the faint musk of unwanted visitors, could feel the vibrations through the air as they walked and talked, could see all around her using the corners of her one remaining eye, could hear the faintest of whispers even with the shattering cacophony of cannons around her. They were being watched. Immediately, her arm shot to a pistol, drew the weapon, and pointed it at the window, smack-dab at where baby Olaf's head was. She blinked twice, made a split-second analysis, and stopped. Kristoff clutched his dick, whining shudders ripping their way through his body.

"Olaf? Oh. Ooooh, you're not supposed to be up this late, what are you doing?" asked Anna.

"Hi mommy!" said baby Olaf.

"Were you watching us?" asked Anna.

"Anna, you should put some clothes aaah... ahhhhhh... on," said Kristoff.

"Yeah, I was watching you play the mommy game!" shouted baby Olaf.

"Oh Olaf... you shouldn't be doing that," said Anna.

"That's... ahhh... right, send... ahhhh... him away quick, before I... arghhh... SVEEEEN. BEFORE I SVEN," said Kristoff, panting heavily.

"You really need to work on your technique, Olaf," said Anna.

"Excuse me?" asked Kristoff. Then his eyes rolled back, and he died the little death, passing out.

"Olaf, never do something like that again," said Anna, getting up from bed and walking over, still in a state of undress.

"Okay!" shouted baby Olaf.

"You see, if you get caught while on reconnaissance, they'll slit your throat," said Anna.

"Or impale you," added snow Olaf helpfully.

"That doesn't sound fun, mommy," said baby Olaf.

"No, it's not. That's why you need to approach from the sides, the rear, or from above. The rear is better than the flanks, and from above is best of all. Then you get the jump on them!"

"Yay! Jumping!"

"Mmhmm, it's just like making chocolate fondue, but with blood instead of chocolate. Also, you don't eat it. That would be kind of silly. Also, you need to use fear."

"Fear?"

"Yes, fear. Fear must be your friend. What happens when you're afraid?"

"I... I make the poo?"

"Yes, you make the poo. What happens when the bad guy gets scared."

Olaf's eyes widened with excitement.

"Do... do they make the poo too, mommy?"

"Uh-huh, that's right! Who's my little genius?"

"I am!"

"That's right, and what does my little genius do while they poo?"

"I dunno."

"You slllllll..."

"I slit their throats!"

"That's right! Who wants ice cream tomorrow?"

"I do!"

"But you have to tell me what to do next."

"How do I do that?"

"If fear makes them poo, what must you become?"

The boy scratched his head, puzzled. Then the answer came to him.

"I must become fear!"

"What do you fear, Master Olaf?"

"I get really scared when you make dinner."

"You must become fear."

"I will become fear."

"What do you fear, Master Olaf?"

"I fear the fish."

"Now, what are you?"

"I am... I am the Lutefisk!"

"Again."

"I AM THE LUTEFISK!"

"WHO ARE YOU?" screamed Anna.

"I AM LUTEFISK MAN! I AM THE FACE OF FEAR!"

Two weeks later, young Olaf would rappel in on the couple having sex, striking from above with boomerangs made of jellied fish. Anna squealed with delight when it happened. She had a son to be proud of.

And sometimes, late at night, Kristoff would wake up in sweats, staring at the ceiling. He was surrounded by crazy people. His wife was crazy. But she loved him. Such was his life.

Rapunzel was the picture of a loving mother. She was a bit too permissive, perhaps. She got very excited about the games her daughters played, and often joined them in their coloring sessions. She did everything with them, except when they wanted alone time. The country lived to serve her, but she lived to serve her children. That's not to say they didn't have odd habits.

Eugene walked into the playroom and looked around.

Instantly, three sets of eyes met his, staring back. They were tiny, white, and beady.

"Mother. Is it Reich time now?" asked Elizabeth Christine.

"I shall sing the song of conquest," said baby Gothel, spitting out her pacifier.

"Not yet, mine kinder. We shall wait," said Rapunzel.

Eugene stopped. Of the creepy things Blondie liked to do, this definitely ranked a strong 6/10.

Of course, he could always go back to counting the money with his face on it. So he did.

The children went back to playing.

Missile Crisis: Interlude

The streets of Shaoguan were calm. Everything lay under heaven, and heaven was merciful.

But heaven and the emperor were far, far away, and the hand of the local government was swift and merciless.

The city was awash with muted, bright colors, a bootleg DVD of a city. Tonight, as with every night, Lutfisk Man was on the prowl, his keen eyes sweeping every dark alley and blind road for dastardly rogues and the colorful characters that he called villains.

He still remembered his father's last words to him before the ship sank.

"Son, you really shouldn't listen to your mother so much. Killing is bad."

Killing is bad. It was a motto to live by. Luckily, he could still rough people up. He had to clean up this city.

He squatted over the carved wooden dragon, scoping out the world over the tiled roof. Beside him was his trusty manservant. He had a name, but Lutfisk Man would be damned if he could pronounce it, so he was just his loyal sidekick-China Man.

" "asked the China Man.

"You know why, China Man. Because MY PAREENNTTTSSS ARE DEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAD."

" "

"I know. I miss them too."

Together, they fought crime and ate weird meat.

A piercing scream shattered the Oriental calm, and Lutefisk Man tensed. It was time to spring into action. China Man followed him. He jumped rooftop to rooftop, grappling his way along. He was as agile as the flying fish, and as deadly as the cod at full power. No one could stop him in his pursuit of justice. China Man shuffled behind him, taking the roads like a normal person.

Lutefisk Man was impressively well-armed, thanks to the constant efforts of his dearly-deceased mother. He had all the best gadgets an 1830s vigilante could buy, and his body was wiry and powerful from a lifetime of physical conditioning. He was tall and imposing, the genetic legacy of two parents well larger than the average. He had been trained to fight in ways both clean and dirty. China Man was of average height for a Chinaman at the time, which is to say not tall at all. He wasn't a very good fighter, but he could do laundry and make a mean shrimp dumpling.

He arrived on the scene of the crime, and gasped audibly. One could practically see the garbled captions fill the air as the action intensified. It was his archnemesis, the Jerker, foe of all non-preserved meat products everywhere. The Jerker raised a puppy in the air. Lutefisk Man gasped again. With a flick of his wrist, the Jerker transmuted the puppy into a bag of dog jerky. That fiend!

They began a poorly lip-synced dialogue.

"Lutefisk Man... it's nice to... MEAT YOU again. Hwek hwek hwek!" said the Jerker.

"This is no laughing matter, you just jerkied that puppy! Now we must kung fu fight!" replied Lutefisk Man.

"So now we have a BEEF? Hwek hwek hwek. Come on then, boy, unless you're CHICKEN. I'll hang you on the RACK to DRY. HWEK HWEK HWEK," replied the Jerker.

Lutefisk Man ran towards the Jerker, and they began to fight. The Jerker threw a bag of that little stuff that always comes in the bags of

jerky, the deoxidants, and it hit Lutefisk Man in the face, bursting into a tiny cloud. Luckily, Lutefisk Man had a can of air in his utility belt, and a gas mask, and also a de-jerkifier, and he was able to save himself in the nick of time. Then Lutefisk Man threw a punch that slammed into the Jerker with a mighty ZONK. The Jerker smiled, and punched back. KAPOW. WHAM! ZAM! KLUNK! KAPOW! OUCH! SWISH! SWOOSH! KERPLOP!

Lutefisk Man reeled back. The punches didn't hurt that much, since the Jerker was malnourished and had very skinny arms. But the sound effects were deafening to his highly sensitive fish ears. The Jerker walked over and put his foot on Lutefisk Man's chest, a jerky eating grin plastered across his face.

"Say GOOD BUY, because I'm about to BAG ME SOME FISH JERKY!"

"THAT'S NOT A PUN!"

"Well, I had a pun there, it still counts."

"No, it's a general shopping related one, it could be used by any of my rogues gallery!"

Just then, China Man walked into the building. China Man smacked his face with his palm in exasperation. This happened every night without fail. Both Lutefisk Man and the Jerker stared at him. China Man walked up. The pair continued staring. China Man mumbled something under his breath, took a barbeque pork bun out of his pocket, and stuffed it into Lutefisk Man's mouth.

"Gadzooks, I feel strong!" shouted Lutefisk Man, as he sprang to his feet.

The Jerker screamed hideously as he fell backwards into the meat packing machine. He was probably dead, but he'd be back by next week. This happened every once in a while. It was a nice excuse for

Lutefisk Man to change his costume too. Lutefisk Man was getting tired of his Lutenipples.

Lutefisk Man walked outside, into the sharp air of the night. Have you ever wanted to have sex with a can of beans? I have. There, standing in the moonlight, was Canwoman, another one of Lutefisk's many enemies. Seriously, many, many enemies. Who really needs that many? Anyways, she wasn't just an enemy. She was also a love-interest/enemy/flirt-robot/slutty can burglar. She stole cans from the rich to give to herself, but since there weren't many cans in Shaoguan, she stole the few ones there as sensually as she could, and sometimes teamed up with Lutefisk Man to fight different people. It was complicated, probably.

Also, she was dressed like a can. Like a big old tin can. It was labeled "Hot Stuff". So yeah.

Lutefisk Man was the can opener. Also, insert a metaphor for penis. Pick your favorite. I know you have one.

They made love under the moon while China Man watched. China Man liked to watch. He watched a lot.

Then Lutefisk Man's keen nose smelled crime. Unfortunately, they had not yet made love long enough to meet minimum union quotas. I forgot to mention there was a union for this sort of thing. It's very complicated, you know? Got a lot of estimates and subcontractors and tiny rules. Can't break them, or Big Guang will break your fingers. So Canwoman latched onto Lutefisk Man, like a lamprey onto an female anglerfish, if the lamprey was a male anglerfish that was really a woman shaped like a can, and also if that male anglerfish didn't wither into a sperm tube permanently, but instead only for about three minutes. If that's hard to see, imagine a U-boat torpedoing the Lusitania while King Triton watches ESPN. It's like that. Trust me.

Anyways, Lutefisk Man arrived on the scene, Canwoman still sucking on his face. There was a man, stuck in an opium stupor.

What's more, he was a dealer himself! Such a ruffian had to be roughed up so that he learned the error of his ways.

The man, who had a family surname of Kang, blinked. There was a foreign devil there, and things had suddenly gone very strange. As the man beat the tar out of him, he resolved to never take opium again, as it clearly had affected his mind. Furthermore, this was the end to his life of crime. Going clean meant going clean in everything, or else the life would pull him back in.

Forty years later, Lutefisk Man was an old man. His had been a long and fulfilling one. He had between seven and thirty-two children, depending on the day. His Lutefamily was loving and large, and they all fought crime, each in more ridiculous costumes than the others. He had been through many an adventure. There was even the time he was dead, and China Man became Lutefisk Man. Also, there was the time he was dead again, and there was a robot Lutefisk Man, and a cyborg Lutefisk Man, and a bunch of other Lutefisk Men, and also there was a red one and a blue one? It was weird, real weird. In fact, it may have just been a food-poisoning related hallucination.

Anyways, it was about then a Coronan steamer pulled into China, Anna Hohenzollern and her husband Kristoff having come along to discuss the resolution of the Margary affair.

They stumbled into each other. Turns out, he could've found out his parents weren't dead if he had only kept up with the newspapers. It was a very awkward meeting for everyone, especially Kristoff.

Especially Kristoff.

Later that week, Mr. Kang would be found dead in the streets, his flesh carefully flayed in scales from his body. His employers had not been pleased, and had given him the death from a thousand cuts.

The killing of a little man can make a big difference.

Nearly a hundred years later, a crisis was brewing in Nationalist China. They had just developed nuclear weapons.

There were three Chinas where there should only be one. Chang Kai-Shek assigned one of his generals, Fa Xibo, to prepare an attack against the Manchurian Empire and Red China. It was time to restore balance and seize the Mandate of Heaven in full. There could only be one China!

The soldiers lie in wait. The machinery whizzes and buzzes, lights slowly flickering to life. A red bulb flashes. The next few come to life in a line. The test was about to begin.

Unfortunately, the USSR did not see it that way. Communist China was a useful puppet and buffer state, even if Mao was getting a bit too uppity for his position. If the capitalists could take China in whole, it would upset the power balance of the whole region. The USSR placed soldiers on the Chinese border.

Suddenly, a flash like a thousand weeping stars. It is a fire that man had no right to wield. But man does not live by privileges and rights. It steals fire from the gods, and laughs at the mockery. The soldiers don their gas masks.

Fa Xibo went to the family altar to pray. It was merely tradition. The fire of a dragon was no longer necessary when the Chinese could call upon nuclear fire. He prayed to have the strength of his illustrious ancestors, the strength to bring down a modern horde of Huns.

Horses rode towards the mushroom cloud. Soldiers dashed forward, took up positions. They sprayed their AK-47s to suppress the enemy, supporting their allies as they maneuvered the field. Movements must be fast and decisive, whether the weapon is used by you or your enemy.

Phones rang in Washington. They had to work with their allies, but if the Soviets made a move, it could all be over. Kennedy sat uneasily

in the Oval Office.

The Doomsday Clock was one minute to midnight.

And the silent prayers of the many hoped to God that there would be a day's reprieve.

Author Notes: Some of you might be a little confused. What this little exchanges means is that Wild Fox Kang is never born. Without Kang's ambition and drive, Dowager Empress Cixi is able to push through more reforms, and dies slightly later, having not suffered health complications brought on by the guilt of murdering her son. This allows China to appear stronger and resist foreign invasion a while longer. Without Kang actively jockeying for power and working with the Japanese, the Qing Dynasty lives a bit longer. But the Japanese are powerful and motivated. Even in modern China, corruption is endemic. As such, the reforms look very good on paper, but fail to be adequate in reality, as corrupt officials siphon away money. The Qing Dynasty dissolves anyways, the weight of the system too heavy to bear for any Emperor insufficiently strong. Even the reforms are unable to save it. However, it dissolves much later. The nation is partitioned between the Manchurian Empire, Red China, and White China. Chang Kai-Shek is almost able to crush the Red Chinese, when the Americans issue their infamous Halt Order. Manchuria slips away from Japan, becoming fully independent following WWII. Fortunately for Chang, in this timeline he has a stronger position to fall back to, and he is able to hold much of China, albeit at great cost. After the civil war, he begins his White Terror and consolidates power. Eventually, his men are able to develop their own nuclear weapons. The stage is now set for the missile crisis, with the Nationalists clamoring eagerly for the restoration of China as it should be.

Man of Destiny: Interlude

" It was my honor and privilege to serve such a man." - Marshal Anna Hohenzollern

Whisper into the wind, and listen to what it whispers back.

Napoleon looked at France with tear-filled eyes. He had to travel with a retinue. It was the only way for a man of his imperial dignity.

The roads were soggy with mud, and his clothes dirtied with every day in flight.

There was still a chance, if Napoleon could seize it. It would have to be done wholeheartedly, but it could be done. There were still ships enough to break the British blockade, albeit with great risk. The fastest ship of the fleet would carry the Emperor to safety, while the others engaged the British ships. Napoleon could slip out into the wide, blue sea, and no one would be able to find him. The Americans still loved him. In America, he could find a renewed calm. There was still hope.

But Napoleon was tired, and his hopes had been dashed too many times. He could reinvent himself, could cast everything aside and roll the dice once more, but he would lose everything he had. Even these rags of Empire were now cherished things, though rags they were. If he left Europe now, he would never be able to return. He would never see his son again. He would never murmur sweet serenades to the grave of his Josephine.

And so he hesitated, and his chance was lost.

A fat man with receding hair and broken English. That is what the English found, as Napoleon threw himself at their mercy. Napoleon was tried, sent to St. Helena, and died on British poison.

Love, of course, love.

Love is a force that's powerful and strange.

Love means putting someone else's needs above your own.

Those loyal to Napoleon remembered him. One by one, they cast their legacies into the void. Achievement after achievement faded from their names and was heaped onto Napoleon. It was a concerted act of sacrifice, and not a man would break that solemn covenant. It was Napoleon and his followers, then Napoleon and a few, then finally, Napoleon alone. Napoleon was dead. But the Man of Destiny lived on, fed by the legend. The Man of Destiny had single-handedly brought Europe low, had single-handedly forged the rule of law, had single-handedly saved the French from starvation. History would not remember the names of those who followed Napoleon, except in brief passing.

But they would remember the Man of Destiny.

His followers had sacrificed their legacies. In exchange, the Man of Destiny had become immortal.

In the coming years, the Man of Destiny would loom larger and larger.

Had there ever been an act of love so true?

Napoleon was dead. The Man of Destiny lived.

He had been saved by not one, not two, but a great multitude of acts of true love.

Love means putting someone else's needs above your own.

The Bourbon monarchy would fall, never to rise again, but the French would not keep their newfound freedom.

They loved Napoleon far too much for that.

And so, the dead living hand of the Man of Destiny delivered the French Empire to his son at last.

Measure of a Man: Interlude

The pitter patter of the rain splashed against the cobbled streets. Anna followed the coffin along, steady and calm in her pace. She never cried anymore. It was unbecoming for someone of her status and experience. Still, it seemed that her umbrella was fraying, or perhaps the rain drops were too aggressive. The rain fell on through.

The Berliner Dom stood, waiting to receive yet another one of its lost daughters. The cathedral was quite grand and was sometimes called the Protestant St. Peter's. Elsa's father and mother had not been interred in the crypt, a grim emptiness breaking the rest of those hallowed halls. The church was guarded by rows of golden angels. The sky was crying, so they were crying. Soft faces were held by equally soft golden hands. In a way, the church was the family itself. It had first been acknowledged as the family first began its slow rise to power, shortly after they transferred their seat of power to Berlin. With wealth came reconstruction, and the first cathedral replaced the church. It had been renovated with the conversion to Protestantism. The church had changed itself, just as the horrors of war transformed Prussia-Brandenburg into Corona. When Frederick the Great took power and made his miracle, the cathedral again remade itself, the force of that saintly blessing driving it into a new form. Now, it had been rebuilt again, following damage in the Napoleonic Wars. Each time, the increased power and prosperity of Corona had made it larger and ever more beautiful. Two more remakings laid in its future, one forged with the steel of empire, and the other with nuclear fire.

Tens of thousands had been at the first ceremony, an eager throng mobbing around the coffin. Most of them just wanted one last glimpse of the Queen that had done so much for Arendelle. Gas masks were curiously absent from the crowd. A bit of lung damage was more than a fair price for being able to see the Queen with true, genuine eyes, and not the cruel filter of the lens. Her corpse laid there, hands folded elegantly. It was ice, pure and clear. The facets

of the body glimmered a thousand ways in the chemical light, a diamond shining bright. Anna had watched silently. As the ceremony ended, she and a few Arendelle royal guards slid the lid closed on the wrought-iron casket. The cannons sounded in salute, and they carried the coffin to a steamer waiting at the docks.

Dozens of sarcophagi stood watchful on the church floor. Great rulers now rested in silent effigy. Elsa's own parents were missing, the allocated space suspiciously bare. There Elsa was laid to rest, in conspicuous emptiness.

They had said Queen Elsa was good in the eulogy.

But by what measure do we gauge goodness? In the Napoleonic Wars alone, Elsa had killed over 1.2 million people. And yet, is each of those redeemed by saving a life? What do we call the saving of a life? Its continuation where it might otherwise be cut short? Then Elsa had redeemed herself ten times over. Her firm hand destroyed the wretched specter of smallpox. Life expectancy at birth had more than doubled during her rule. Before her, families had to eat ashes and tears. The factories brought wealth to Arendelle, and wealth brought food. The crying men had once been crying boys who had felt the clawing emptiness of hunger, and knew how the Queen had sent it away forever. And these gentle ambrosial tears would echo far beyond humble Arendelle. When her wild, and quite frankly, unfounded, assumptions had come true, and the sanitation plans had worked, the model would be imitated. Country after country took up arms and slew the beast of disease and the horrors of death. Yet the inventions of war spurred to damned fruition by her presence would also deal more than their fair share of suffering. The Maxim Gun would be the fist that crushed Africa. Chemical weapons would be a cloak falling over the innocent trenches of WWI. Incendiaries would burn through the world, insatiable in their loving vengeance.

In the end, it is not so easy to say who is good. What sort of a moral calculus can be done, or should be done? What is the value of a life? What is the measure of utility?

What is the measure of a man? When the account of their life must be given, who can answer?

We cannot say that Queen Elsa was good.

We can say, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she was Great.

1849. Requiescat in pace.

Her sister would not join her in death. The open burial was reserved for those who had reigned, and Anna and her family would be buried in more humble grounds below the church floor. The marble slabs were placed over the entrance to the underworld, and then silence resumed its regency. The church would always welcome its children back home. A lifetime of service would always be rewarded with a good rest.

1884. Requiescat in pace.

Born with the dawning of a new age of liberty, dead with the Scramble for Africa. Anna had lived to age 100, surviving her sister by three and half decades, and outliving her own husband by five. She had bore witness to an entire century of history. It was a time span as long as the one separating the founding of Pennsylvania and the American Revolution. It was as long as the distance between the First World War and Web 2.0. It was the rise and the fall of the Judio-Claudians of long dead Rome. She had seen Arendelle wreathed in snow and whispering fjords. She had seen Arendelle encircled by railroads, sky dark yellow with industrial smog, and seas filled with the luminescent gloss of chemical runoff. She had seen the first inklings of the wild plan, the fulfillment of it and the founding of Bjorgman Water, and then the spread to new lands, as untold millions poured in the family coffers, the profits of a massive bottled water boom. She had seen the skies clear again, as a new generation of chemists refined the methods of their fathers, and restored the natural beauty of the world using hard-won efficiency. But what she wanted to see most, she had not had for very long. As

quiet death took the war-scarred woman, she glimpsed into the darkness and saw a snowman taking shape.

The pallbearers laid the coffin at its final resting place. Though Anna's remains could not join those of her sister, they had given her the courtesy of lying directly below Elsa's sarcophagus.

A man of snow and a man who was no man at all watched. It was the least they could do for the last family that would ever know them. The funeral procession melted away in the cold October rain. The man of snow climbed atop his reindeer steed, and they left Berlin, never to return. Nary a trace was left of the two, and the last remnants of a bygone age faded into the sands of time, forgotten even by history.

Monarchy: Interlude

A nation is like a body. It has its own parts, working in unison to guide itself towards prosperity.

It has a head.

Elsa stumbled inside, groggy with exhaustion. As soon as the door slammed behind her, and one can sure it slammed, with the force Elsa threw it back with, her hands shot up to her face, and she ripped the stultifyingly small gas mask from her face, letting the air caress her skin. She ripped the bun of her hair open, letting it fall loose into a braid. She wiped the matted thick sweat from her brow and sighed. She had an acid rain warning to issue.

Her daughter was waiting there. Great, more business to take care of. Did she really just think that? Well, it was true. The day had already been far too long, and she had a warning to issue. She composed herself, drew herself up straight, and nodded to her spawn. She just thought of her beloved daughter and heir as a spawn. Great. Wonderful.

"Mother? I'd like to ask your permission... to marry Nicky," said Elsa Maria.

"You want to marry Nicholas," said Elsa flatly.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Do you know his foot size? Favorite food? Hobbies? Family history? How he lives? How he dresses?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I do my research, mother. He's absolutely charming."

"He's a stick-in-the-mud who pretends to be a two-bit general on a one-bit horse."

"The way you can see him just barely crack the hint of a smile when the men drill in the square. Oh, he gets so passionate. And yet, when he's alone, he's just this stumbling mess, and I just want to hold him and squeeze. I really can't describe it."

"I can. He hides his true feelings, he's hateful, and he's awkward, and these things are probably all products of his stupidity. Because he's stupid. Alex has two stupid brothers."

"Mother!"

"What about when he puts a pistol up to your heart... and shoots?"

"Mother? I-I d-d-don't..."

Elsa snapped her fingers, and an ice spike burst out of the wall. She snapped them again, and more spikes came out from the floor. One shot towards Elsa Maria's neck, and slowly grew larger.

"It's very **VERY VERY** easy to kill someone. All kings do it," said Elsa.

"Please, stop! Please!"

"What do you even know about him?"

"He would never hurt me! Stop! He's a prince, he's noble."

"A prince? A description practically synonymous with sociopathy. If that was what I had to do, I could kill you right now, and I wouldn't

even blink."

Elsa's daughter was sobbing, her eyes darting quickly around, scanning the ice around her. The ice spike almost pressed against her neck now.

"I love him! Mom, I love him!" screamed Elsa Maria.

Elsa released her grip, and the ice spikes faded into dust. The Queen fell back onto a wall, and leaned there, hands cradled over her face.

"I used to think these powers were a curse. I was stupid. Every year, the ice brings in almost 25 vereinsthaler for every citizen of Arendelle," said Elsa.

"Mother? I don't understand," replied her daughter.

"The ice wasn't the curse. If I was a nobody, I could just frolic in the mountains all day. No one would care. It would be easy. Make ice sculptures everywhere, dance a little. Sing songs. Play with the woodland creatures. Being a princess, that's the real curse. Who could ever want to be a princess?"

"Are you okay?"

"Okay? Okay? I almost killed you," hissed Elsa, teeth grinding against each other.

"You would never hurt me."

"How do you know? I've hurt a lot of people. Innocent people. Didn't save them."

Elsa slumped into a tiny ball, and stared over at the wall carvings.

"I used to think my dad was afraid of me. He wasn't afraid of me, he was afraid for me. I'm a terrible mother. All those diplomats and their

smiling faces, and they can smell weakness. Conceal, don't feel. It wasn't about the powers. Nothing's changed."

Her daughter walked over, sat down next to her. She put her hand on her shoulder.

"I couldn't ever see my sister, but dad still stopped by the room. He would try to play with me or help me with whatever problems I had, but he would never smile, and I never could understand why. I understand now. I wish I didn't. You look... like mom. I'm rambling just like Anna does. How ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous."

"Do you love him?"

"With all my heart."

"I'll tell Alexander. Constantine can be heir. It's not like either of them is man enough for the crown anyways. What's one buffoon compared to another?"

"Thank you."

"Please don't leave me. I know I'm awful, and terrible, and absolutely horrid, but... I don't want be alone."

"You're not terrible. A terrible mother wouldn't read a bedtime story to me and Nappy every night, even when there was a lot of work. A terrible mother wouldn't know my favorite food, or how I take my cocoa. She wouldn't know what books I liked or who my favorite painter is."

"I almost killed you."

"No, you didn't. The tip of that spike was too blunt, and the texture indicated it was full of bubbles and structural weaknesses. Besides, you didn't adequately block my escape routes. Plus, the ice you made is naturally very weak, and I wear steel-toed boots."

"That's very observant."

"I learned from the best, Mom. I learned from the best."

It has hands.

"Linda! How's the coffee?"

"Same as usual. Shit."

Linda was a dumpy looking woman, with short hair and short height. Her dull brown eyes complemented her listless, stringy brown hair nicely. Karl was fat and jowly, his gut jiggling every time he took a step. He had a smile that could charm a dead zebra, and a handshake that was as soft and weak as flan. Sometimes he didn't shave, and a scraggly yellow soul patch would sputter onto his double chin. He was balding, and his comb-over didn't hide the fact. If anything, it made it worse.

"How are the kids, Linda?" asked Karl.

"Same as usual. They don't visit, they don't write, they don't care. Yours?" replied Linda.

"Oh, you know. Still young and innocent. Sarah wants to go into the business when she grows up. It's adorable, Daddy's little pumpkin always wants to please. She made me a drawing. It's nice," said Karl.

"Is it? Well, one day she'll be a bitter old bitch screaming about how much she hates you."

"I hope not. Do we have any more of those little jam cakes?"

"Check the buffet table."

Karl walked over to the table. There were many people there. Some were awkwardly standing to the side, hands in their pockets. Others

were striking up little conversations about little subjects. Still others were drinking raucously, their uproarious laughter occasionally drowning out people's small talk. Small groups were clustered around various party games. Karl picked up a few jam cakes, casually checked for poisons, and shoved one in his maw, chewing with his mouth open.

The door opened, and all eyes immediately shot to it, while all hands went to weapons. Then, some internal relief, although hands were still kept ready. It was just Old Tim. He shuffled in, adjusted his spectacles, and took a seat. His shaky hands palmed through the letters he had, occasionally going back to his face to adjust his glasses. After a minute, he found the letter he was looking for. He raised it in the air, and everyone saw the seal of the crocus and the stamp of the skull. Lots were drawn. Karl lost. He toasted everyone at the office party, took a stiff drink, ate the letter, got his anniversary paperweight from the director, then got his coat and hat. He walked out into the chill night.

He met his mark by the docks. He strangled him, then clubbed in the skull with his paperweight, and ripped out the teeth. He would dispose of the teeth later. He cleaned off the paperweight. He whistled. He liked to whistle while he worked. He dragged the corpse away, chopped it up, and dissolved it. He washed his hands. Cleanliness was next to godliness. He went home. He cooked some risengryn grod. His wife loved it when he cooked. They kissed. He tucked his daughter in, read her a story about a princess of the Holy Roman Empire, a Wittelsbach prince, and some dwarves. He washed the dishes. He went to bed. Today had been a good day. Tomorrow wouldn't be such a great day. A mountain of paperwork would be waiting for him. That was the worst part of an assassination, the paperwork.

Still, it had been a good party. Very pleasant. It had been another successful year in the secret police.

It had legs.

Two workmen were laying pipes. They had a lot of pipe to lay. Bjorgman Water was opening up service to a new city, and that meant pipes had to go straight from the spring way in the mountains down to the houses in the city. That was a lot of pipe, and the pipe was heavy.

It was silly, really. None of the scientific literature suggested that water near the source would be any fresher or better than water downstream. It would be far more economical and far easier to simply pump water from the river once it entered the city. There was not a smidgen of evidence to encourage the idea. The money would be far better spent preventing miasma from forming. The air was already thick with smog, and many learned men were sure that this encouraged the creation of bad air. The Queen, however, insisted on the project, and was bankrolling it with taxpayer money. Normally, such a thing might elicit grumbling and peasant unrest. It did bring about the grumbles, but the people were willing to accept it. The Queen had already done so much for them, and most families had never been as rich as they were now. The factories had turned paupers into playboys, and beggars into builders. Meat, vegetables, and bread at every meal, not just for special occasions. That was especially significant considering how much food Arendelle had to import. So the people put up with Queen Elsa's mad spring water plan. Who knows? Maybe it did taste better from the source.

One of the workmen stopped to take a break. His lungs were burning with exertion, and he had to wipe sweat away. He leaned against a pipe segment. Then he stumbled back in shock, as the pipe began to shift. He turned around and watched in horror as the pipe rolled away, slamming into a distant tree.

It had been easier when they were constructing the aqueduct sections of the waterway. Pipes were a pain in the ass.

He looked at his fellow workman. They made a silent agreement.

One of the pipes was defective and unusable. That was the long and the short of it. It would have to be replaced. It was most certainly not

accidentally damaged.

So the project went on.

A government is like a body. This government was like a highly dysfunctional one. However, it was also reasonably close to the best possible one.

The medieval government had been dysfunctional. Elsa's government was dysfunctional. Rapunzel's government would be dysfunctional. The Council of the Norwegian Soviets would be dysfunctional. The Maoist government would be dysfunctional. The Gang of Three's government would be dysfunctional. The post-Cold War government would be dysfunctional.

And yet, time and time again, order would rise up out of chaos. No matter what, a government would always form and take hold. There would be a hand there to stop some abuses and crimes, and commit others.

Governments are not born for the sake of oppression or incompetence. People need stability, order, and banality in their lives. A boring life is a safe one. When there is a need, it will be filled. Such is simply the human way.

Maldonia: Interlude

Nobility was all show and bluster.

Robert Maldon did not look like a showman. A large, thick coat was draped over his thick shoulders. His eyes had the glassy quality of a man who had seen so much. His nose was large and bulbous, meaty and crude. His hair was short and hugged his head tightly. His large square jaw was usually framed with a scowl. It was a rare occasion to see him without one of his comically large cigars. He was short and squat, possessing a robust, stout body. Over the course of the Indian conquests, he would gain a scar over his eye. It wouldn't bother him. How might one describe such a man? Warrior? General? Tactical genius?

His performance in India would prove all these things true. But that was not his true character.

He was an excellent showman precisely because he did not look like one.

He used the symbol of the bear prominently. It was a good symbol. Bears were strong, dependable, fierce, and willing to die to protect their families. His men would chant his message, Ursa's Cardinal Creed. He was well aware that his men would see him as the Creed. He was counting on it.

His foes were many, and their resistance unending.

His men carried standards adorned with eagles. The resemblance to both Rome and Napoleon was intentional. His message was clear: he was to set up an empire that would be the stuff of legends. Even if he failed, the world would fear him.

On the surface, his strategy appeared to be a conventional one, sound and uninventive. He sieged cities, confronted enemy armies,

scorched some earth and left other bits alone. Of course, that wasn't his real strategy. He had a European friend, a very white one, who was leading various untouchables and other low castes as a rebel army. The peasants would see this strange white man as a foreign liberator from their swarthy oppressors. The native overlords would see it as yet another foreign incursion to be crushed, a proponent of those new wicked European ideas that would destroy all virtue and goodness. It was neither, of course. Puppets weren't much of anything. Multiple armies gave him great freedom and mobility, and no one would ever pin it on him.

Even his tactics smelt of deceit, although few would ever notice. His favorite stratagem was to suddenly pull massive forces out of nowhere, placing them right behind enemy lines and annihilating them in the chaos. Loyal men would be smuggled into the local population, and reconstitute as full units when the time came. It was a useful ploy of his own invention. He built a massive artillery piece, the Eye of India, and used it for terror reasons. It did not do much damage, but the sound and sight of it was enough to strike men dumb.

He would marry into the Indian Bourbons, founding the House of Maldon-Bourbon. His wife was useful. And over the years, Robert would grow to appreciate that. He would notice how she never complained, never listened in, never bothered learning what he really did. She never asked to cuddle, never asked for gifts. She was always subservient, humble, and quiet. He would acknowledge that. Was that love? Maybe.

Some of his enemies were creatures of the land. They could command armies, inspire men, rally their forces. They were skilled in tactics and strategy. These soldiers would put up a good fight in the field. Hot was their blood. Others were creatures of the sea. Their words flowed like water, effortlessly and with great force and mass. They swished about, moving carelessly and quickly from one social event to the next. They could lie to you without blinking, and steal from you without thinking. Cold was their blood. And Maldon?

Maldon slipped between these worlds without the slightest bit of difficulty. He was amphibian. Some might call this dishonorable and slimy behavior. Maldon preferred to think of it as mucus.

Nabob. It's a funny word for plunderer. Across India, citizen-adventurers were making their fortunes. With the barest scrapings of manpower and a dream, they would crush ancient empires and steal their riches. Of course, Maldon was also one of those vultures circling around the Indian carcass. There were many of those men, all forged imperfectly from Clive's mold. The difference between the nabob and Maldon was competence. In the end, that would make all the difference. He would gut them.

Of course, he would also cultivate a reputation for invulnerability along the way. Again and again, he would clash indecisively with the rebel army. Shots would fly by him, cannons would be aimed at him harmlessly, and charges and fire would go against him dozens of times, only to be ineffective at every turn. No matter what, he lived. Horses were shot out from under him, and he would live. Grazing wound after grazing wound, but nothing that could ever seriously harm him. He would stand in the line of fire many times, and emerge unscathed each time. He stood like a stone statue, completely unperturbed by the bloody warfare all about him. It was amazing the things you could do with friends on the other side.

He had been but a tadpole when he had seen the map of India unfurl, and yet it had stuck in his imagination. He envisioned himself swimming the ancient Indus and Ganges, spawning an empire to stand the test of time.

To call India a subcontinent is accurate, but in a way, demeaning. It is easy to imagine it as one country, just another in a panoply of nations. However, the population of a continent is packed into this landmass, a landmass only a third as large as the United States. The various kingdoms that dotted the map, though tiny in size, were easily the equal of any European country in manpower. Conquering India is not the same as conquering a nation. It is an act comparable to conquering a continent, an act that demands the subjugation of a

score of arrogant princelings and ancient realms. The Marathan Empire was more confederacy than united nation-state. If you wish to take on a challenge, see who benefits from the status quo, and know that they must be defeated.

Robert Maldon had many men to defeat.

There was Maratha and its massive empire. There was the British East India Company and its Mughal puppets. There was the Nizam of Hyberabad, which counted itself as one of Britain's friends. There was Portugal and its stubborn foothold on the subcontinent. There was tiny but intransigent Oudh. For Maldon to win his dream, he would have to destroy them all.

Destroy them he would. He would start with an army of merely 10000, a miniscule sum. By the end of the conquests, more than 6 million would follow his banner, one of the largest armies to ever touch the face of planet Earth. As he grew, he reorganized the governments he conquered into a new, European-style system, one that would allow him to tap as much manpower proportionally as the Europeans could. It was a stunning amount of force, to say the least.

Liberator? Playboy? Warlord? Merchant? Builder? Savior? Demon? He was whatever you wanted him to be, and he played all roles convincingly.

After all, he was a showman at heart.

When all his enemies laid in ruin before his feet, he would not call himself Emperor. He allowed himself only the humble title of Lord Castellan. If the people chose to offer him Imperial Dignity, he would accept it, and they would. But he was a humble and unambitious man.

Maldonia would be born after only two decades of war. In only two decades, Robert Maldon would do something the East India company couldn't in several. Thus, Maldonia was created, one of the

most oppressive, tyrannical regimes to ever grace the Indian subcontinent.

There would be no prince appearing if you kissed this frog. Just a humble Lord Castellan.

Mediatization: Interlude

Again and again, he found himself reminiscing. In a way, it had been the climax of his life. Now, more than ever, as he looked upon that vile idiot's face, he yearned for it.

The air of Versailles had been slightly moist, but pleasant. He had sneezed a few times. It was entirely possible that he was getting ill. You could never be sure with the French climate, it was a detestable thing. It was most certainly possible that he would catch sickness and die in this wretched land.

That morning, he had eaten deviled eggs for breakfast. They were a marvelous little thing. The juicy white flesh of the egg was so pure and clean on the outside, and yet the insides were always scooped hollow and replaced. Sweet, sour, savory, you could put anything inside there, and it would still look like an egg, would still be called an egg. Was it still an egg? Of course it was—that was the trick of it. Nobody really cared if you replaced the contents wholesale.

Earlier that month, he had screamed and pouted at her. They had disagreed over something or other, he couldn't even remember what. She had said no. So he scowled, he cried a few crocodile tears. He had beat his chest, stared out the window, then turned back. Raged a bit, raged against any group that he could pull to mind at the time. She had frowned, looked sheepishly at the floor. He had stomped on the floor, stamped his feet. Then he stared deep into her eyes and insinuated that she did not appreciate him. She did not appreciate the chancellor that had done so much for him. He could leave, he could easily leave! Heaven knows he had already done work far beyond that expected from any man! She, she could sleep in the doghouse. He screamed that she didn't love him! And so Rapunzel had relented, and they had hugged, and then she cracked open a bottle of vodka and then they drank. He had whimpered a few murmurs of her being far too good for him, and she steadfastly

rejected such claims. Then she left, and he rode home. He had sniffed the blankets and thought to himself-this, this was what power was. He had the power. The Queen was wrapped around his finger.

The King walked on by. He was a pleasant enough sort, even if his head had never been set straight for rule. He was useful, though, very useful. He could charm a foreign dignitary with his rugged good looks and anecdotes, and the people loved those tired old rags of a boy who rose to be King, who saved their beloved Queen from imprisonment in a tower. Nevermind that the world was a bit more complicated than that. A happy ending a day kept the revolutionaries away.

The choice of the Hall of Mirrors could be seen as simply the gift of a loyal son-in-law to his mother-in-law. It sent a message to the world. Corona was the big dog of Europe, and it could afford a coronation in the very seat of power of another Empire, and one of the Great Powers at that. Europe worked by its whims. Only an implication, but a powerful one. Let the other powers squabble over Africa and Asia. Let them go on fool colonial adventures. Corona's map of Africa lay in Europe.

They had piled into the Hall of Mirrors. The various lords of Corona had stood before Rapunzel. They drew their swords and swore eternal loyalty to the Sun Crown. He had walked forward with the crown, passing through the throng of nobility, had knelt before his Queen. She took the imperial crown from him, and crowned herself using her authority as God's representative on Earth.

Later, he had been wandering outside, trying to keep his mind off his cough. He had spotted Rapunzel.

She was wearing a ridiculous fake mustache and beard.

"Oh, look at me! I'm Karl Marx! I've got stupid hair! Look at my stupid face! Nyeh, nyeh, nyeh! Blah blah proles, blah blah socialism! Look at how smart I am!" said Rapunzel.

She blew a raspberry.

"Blondie, what are you doing?" asked Eugene.

"Blondie? Who's this... blondie? There is only Marx! The state will soon wither away, like my tiny dick!"

"Riiiiight. Does the smolder still work on Mr. Marx?"

"Of course it does because I'm a big gay dumbie."

"I see. Having fun, Karl?" asked Eugene.

"Government is a monopoly on violence? More like government is a monopoly on fun!"

His mind wandered again.

The wedding, the official one, was a solemn and weighty event, with foreign dignitaries from all sorts of nations attending, and a mixture of pomp and reserve that made things grand but not overbearing.

This was not true of the party the night before. They had to have one. It was an ancient and noble tradition. If the pots were not broken, then evil spirits and bad omens would plague the newlyweds. Of course, if they were going to have this pot-breaking party, then it had to be done right.

Napoleon II did not like the idea much. He would rather have a small ceremony and little fuss, like the wedding of his sister. Effort should be focused on more important things, like ambitious conquests and civil works. Rapunzel, however, insisted, and whatever Rapunzel wanted, everyone wanted.

Parties like this were usually held at the bride's home. This one, however, would be held at the Secret Police headquarters, a building formerly known as the Snuggly Duckling. The secret escape tunnel

had been expanded into a catacombed labyrinth stretching across an entire undercity, allowing the Secret Policemen to appear anywhere at any time. It had been renovated and expanded extensively over the years, but it could still be coerced into remembering its old purpose. Besides, for Rapunzel, the Secret Police HQ was like a home away from home.

Preparations were made. Dozens of pigs, lambs, cows, and quails were slaughtered. Gold was hammered into leaf. Hundreds of ceramic pots were ordered. Tubs were wrought from the purest Arendelle silver. Vast quantities of wine were imported from France. Spices, oils, and perfumes were imported from the distant Orient. Musicians and performers were background checked and summoned to perform. An army of whores was needed, and raised. It was simple enough. The poor would be more than willing to debase themselves for a few thaler. They were even able to convince themselves that it was somehow empowering, or that doing this for the nobility was ennobling. Bismarck smirked at the thought. Few resources were as versatile as the desperate poor.

Never had more august company been gathered for so petty a purpose.

Bismarck was attending. It would make excellent blackmail material.

Rapunzel raised her arms up, and the drums began their drum roll. With a downward flourish, the largest of them were drawn to thunder, and the stone gargoyle heads opened, streams of fondue flowing out into readied troughs. There were rivers of white chocolate, milk chocolate, dark chocolate, and cheese. The silver tubs were moved to sit below overhangs. The festivities would now begin.

They began with traditional dancing. An assemblage of royals poured out into the center of the room, prancing and springing about. Napoleon II stood to the side, shuffling his feet and moving his hands unconvincingly back and forth. Rapunzel walked over, seized his hands, and began to swing him about, dragging him towards the spotlight. Then, as the music changed to a bombastic Prussian

march, she steadily guided Napoleon over to her daughter, and linked their arms together, before shoving the couple back out into the fray. Napoleon blushed. So did Gothel. He stroked Gothel's long brown hair and cradled her head.

As the march came to an end, Rapunzel clapped her hands. Doors at the sides of the halls burst open, and men stood at attention, then strode out. They were bearing dishes of all kinds. Roast beef, suckling pig, braised turkey, fresh fish, Alsatian goose with pears, spiced cakes, honeyed rum, foie gras, all dusted with gold leaf. Queen Elsa stood at the bar, mixing cocktails. With a ironic smile parting her lips, and to Gothel's great embarrassment and Napoleon's great discomfort, Rapunzel called for the singer to come forward and perform "Ich bin ein deutsches Mädchen". As the song came to an end, and the dishes grew sparser, Rapunzel called for a new round of food to feast on, and led the party in a musical number about the joys of alcoholism. After everyone had stuffed themselves to bursting, the tables and chairs were moved to the side. Few were in a position to stand or do anything, so couches were brought to lay on.

The prostitutes were led to the silver tubs, and made to kneel in them as servants poured water over them and washed their bodies. They were lathered up and soaped, bubbles coating the nubile bodies. Queen Elsa raised an eyebrow and flicked a finger, and the room visibly chilled. Nipples became hard enough to cut glass. King Eugene slicked back his salt-and-pepper hair, and shot one a smoldering gaze. Then performers took the stage. There were acrobats, contortionists, knife jugglers, sword swallowers, fire-breathers, and freaks of all shapes and sizes. Attila had prepared a variety of confections and deserts, and manservants gingerly lowered these fluffy creations into the waiting mouths of guests.

After the circus had concluded, Rapunzel brought the guests to the second floor, where the pots were waiting. The pots were then lifted over the tubs using pulleys. Rapunzel lifted her frying pan up, and smashed open the pot. The champagne within fell out, coming down

in a liquid gold drizzle, drenching the whore waiting below. The bride and groom were called to break the next pot. Then it was open season, and pots broke left and right, some suspended above whores, other held in hand and thrown down onto the ground. Whore after whore was glazed with wine, honey, perfume, oils, beer, all sorts of things. The porcelain wasn't supposed to be full when broken, but Rapunzel didn't play by the rules. That's why she was wearing darkly-tinted glasses that evening. Normally a sign of weakness and infirmity, but royalty set trends, and she was sure this one could catch on. As the last pots shattered, massive kegs of wine were rolled into the great hall to dispense their sweet nectar.

The party returned to the ground floor. Whores rubbed their bodies with their liquid coatings, gyrating and swaying sensuously, fingers tracing the outlines of curves along themselves. They undulated and shook. Sweat trickled down thick pectorals and abdomens, ran thin lines down firm and perky breasts. This, too, was a display of Coronan wealth and power. A dance resumed among the guests. As the tempo of the music ramped up, the dances grew disorderly and chaotic. Soon they had lost all cohesion, degenerating into moving bodies groping and coming together, the grinding of flesh against flesh in a sweaty, lustful haze. It was a sort of foreplay, a prelude to things to come.

Bismarck watched.

At one point, Gothel disentangled herself from the heat and mixture. She stumbled over to her mother, who was sitting in a booth seat, flanked by two burly secret policemen in uniforms. Bismarck followed.

"You-a come-ah to me-ah on the day of my daughter's wedding, and-ah you ask-ah me for a favor?" said Rapunzel.

"Mom, please be serious! I have to go real bad!" whined Gothel.

"You-ah think I am not serious, on this, the day of my daughter's wedding? Boys. Tell them how-ah serious I am," replied Rapunzel.

"She's very serious," said one of the guards.

"The boss is always serious," said the other.

"You see? You see? I am always serious. You are asking me for a serious favor. But how can I refuse? This is the day of my daughter's wedding."

"I'll pee in the chocolate fondue! Don't think I won't!"

Eugene walked over.

"Blondie, what are you doing? Bathrooms are over there," said Eugene.

"Thanks dad!" said Gothel, before she dashed off.

"Oh come on, Eugene. You're no fun," said Rapunzel.

"I'll show you how fun I can be later tonight," said Eugene, winking.

Rapunzel looked over, and saw Bismarck. She waved.

"Hey there! Bizzy Bee! Bizzoooper! My main man B! What do you need? Wine? Whores? More tiny sandwiches? Say it, and it's done."

"Nothing, my liege. Enjoy yourself," said Bismarck, and he walked off, grabbing some deviled eggs from a passing tray.

The music was reaching a terrifying crescendo. Elsa had frozen the floor over, and the walls were now adorned with frosty ornamentation. She had mastered the art of changing the ice's color, and now the world flashed between chill blues, pale whites, dark pinks, sharp reds, and golden yellows, the hues pulsing through the room and filling the air. A single icy chandelier dangled above, light being filtered through its multicolored faces.

Anna surveyed the various whores. She counted out several. Two for sister dearest, two for husband beloved, two for herself, and six for

the happy couple. It was a celebration for them, after all. Elsa had shaken her head softly, declined gracefully. Napoleon and Gothe had turned beet red and refused profusely. Anna's response was a simple shrug. It wasn't good to let good meat go to waste, and so later that night, she simply took all twelve up to her room. That night, groggy with exhaustion, Elsa would try to open the wrong door, realize her mistake, but fail to escape before a dozen pairs of arms grabbed her and dragged her in.

As the clock struck twelve, the party stilled. As was customary, the groom, the bride, and anyone else willing would be allowed to leave. After all, it wouldn't be becoming for the groom and bride to be consumed by hangover tomorrow. At this, Napoleon grabbed his wife-to-be, lifted her over his shoulder, and made a run for freedom, locking himself within his room.

After this, the memories grew hazy and blurred. The Secret Police had developed a variety of interesting chemicals, and their expertise now slipped into the cocktails. He remembered Anna naked wrestling a Bengali tiger. He remembered setting something on fire. He got a gift. He didn't remember what it was.

Gifts...

They were outside Versailles now. Rapunzel had approached him.

"Hey there Bismarck," said Rapunzel.

"Greetings, my Kaiserin."

"Hmmm. Should I really still call you Bismarck?"

"A peculiar question, my liege. I am Bismarck, am I not?"

"Really? That's odd, I thought I was talking to the sovereign Duke of Lublin..." said Rapunzel, trailing off.

Duke of Lublin? There was no such...

He was being made a sovereign duke. His family was joining the ranks of the mediatized. He dropped to his knees.

"Thank you, thank you, my Kaiserin! I am unworthy of such generosity."

"Stand. You are a Duke. You will not grovel. You will accept your gift with dignity."

Bismarck stood.

"Hope you don't mind if I still call you Bismarck," said Rapunzel.

"Of course not," replied Bismarck.

Then he was watching the pallbearers as they moved the coffin. He had cried. It was a useful political gesture, and he could cry on command. For everyone to see his devotion to the late Kaiserin was helpful. But then he continued to cry, something that made him look unmanly, and he grabbed the coffin and made great heaving sobs, and eventually the mourners dispersed, and he was there, sitting next to the remains of the Kaiserin and consort he had served for so long, wishing desperately for a deviled egg.

And then he was staring at the Kaiser's face. Such a stupid face for a stupid boy. The boy was only thirty, and youthful naivete still plagued him.

He had lost his temper, which he never did. But who could blame him?

"You stupid, stupid boy! You rash son of a boar! Do you realize what you've done? After your mother's reign, you decide to... decide to do this? I would rather have Elizabeth Christine, would rather have Gothel, would rather have Victoria, would rather have ANYONE than

you! Fighting the Emperor of France? Do you even REALIZE what you've done? You've ruined everything, all my hard work wasted! This is how you choose to start your reign, you damned fool? I suppose we'll be dreaming of conquering Africa next! Do those tribal trinkets sound good to you? Do you want the shinies? The jingly gold pieces? Ooooh, jingle jingle shinies, that's what makes a fool happy!"

And the Kaiser had merely glared at him.

"Chancellor. You will remember who is Kaiser here."

And Bismarck realized his error.

Where did he think he was?

Then he realized his error. He was sitting there, alone in the whited sepulcher. The Berliner Dom wrapped around him. The face of his Kaiserin stared back in graven gold. He donned his pickelhaube, wiped off his tears, and walked into the chill of yet another 1888 night.

Mashed Potatoes: Interlude

Mashed potatoes. One of the most boring but functional foods in all existence.

Still exotic for Elsa II Maria. They didn't grow much in the way of potatoes up in Arendelle.

"So this is your master plan, eh? Feed me potatoes," said Elsa Maria.

"Yeah, basically. If you get high blood pressure, I can kill you the same way I killed mother. Then I'll inherit the purely symbolic and powerless Arendelle throne," replied Napoleon II.

"This got very dark very fast."

"You know me. Sick sense of humor. More potatoes?"

"I won't fall for your dastardly potato plan."

"You sure?"

"Yes. So what's your real plan?"

"Real plan? Potatoes."

"You're joking."

"Completely serious."

"How do potatoes do anything?"

"You figure it out."

"How am I supposed to figure your crazy plan out?"

"We're twins. We've got a special connection. We can even finish each others-"

"Sesquipedalian loquaciousness."

"Sunset Sasparilla."

"Sourdough Yukonite."

"Sleeping on it."

"Sausage festival."

"Serenades to Spaniards."

"Sixpence for rent."

"Sickness and health."

"Sobriety."

They stopped and looked straight into each others eyes.

"Okay, I feel like we should make out now," said Elsa Maria.

"You're a deeply disturbed individual," replied Napoleon II.

"We have a special sibling bond."

"Yeah, I felt it too."

"Jesus, we're fucked up."

"How are the potatoes?"

"Good, I guess. So back to that plan you were talking about...?"

"Alright. You ready?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You really sure?"

"I feel like this is reminding me of something."

"You really really sure?"

"Yeah, you would always give me a noogie after asking that last question."

"Yeah, I would."

"What's the plan?"

"I'm going to... do absolutely nothing."

"That's your genius plan?"

"Yes."

"To do nothing?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you got shot in the gut and not the brain?"

"It's brilliant, isn't it?"

"No, it's the other thing. It's extremely stupid."

"Pfff."

"I feel like maybe I've misjudged you all along. Maybe you've been stupid this whole time. Oh god, we're twins. Does that make me stupid too? Please, mom, come back! I don't want to be a stupid old lady!"

"DUN DUN DUN. It's too late to prevent it. We're both already OLD! And dumb!"

"Oh no."

"Check your liver spots. You know it to be true."

"Oh nooooooooo."

"Yeah, so the plan is to do nothing."

"How is that going to help?"

"Auntie Anna always says to maximize your advantages and minimize your disadvantages. She's lived to be like... what, ninety-four now? It's not like she shies away from fights either. War has changed. All these improved weapons are going to make direct assaults very difficult. If my dear brother-in-law wants to take Paris, he'll have to push past a maze of trenches."

"And what happens if you die and your son takes over?"

"He'll probably mess it up."

"Pessimistic as always."

"Realist, sis, realist."

"I still can't believe he turned out to be such an asshole. He was such a cute baby."

"Spare the emotional neglect and constant absence, spoil the child, I say. Punzie spent too much time with her kids. One of them was bound to turn out rotten."

"He hit you in the face in the middle of a state ball."

"Yeah. He knocked some teeth out too."

"What would mom do right now?"

"Curl up into a ball, try not to cry, cry a lot. Then murder like a million people with ice magic."

"That's a way better plan than mashed potatoes. Why don't we do that?"

"Because mom had a heart attack when she heard I got shot, and she'd probably be dead of old age by now anyways."

"Wow, such realism."

"We must always be as grounded as the mighty potato. Be like the potato, and no foe will ever vanquish you. In fact, I'm replacing the tricolor of France with a potato."

"You love potatoes too much."

"I'm an Irishman trapped in the body of a Norwegian-Corsican pretending to be French. Woe is me."

"Alack, to be such a pitiful and wretched creature."

"Mmhmm, shame, shame. Shame upon our house."

"You know what? I like mashed potatoes."

"I do too, sis. I do too."

Man of Steel: Interlude

Ioseb Jughashvili.

Attila took the helmet off and looked at himself in the mirror.

"I've been thinking about a legacy, kid."

The town was silent, but for his words and the pitter-patter of rodents along the streets.

"Yeah?" asked the youth beside Attila.

"Yeah. Let's get going," said Attila.

They walked along the empty streets, through the market, towards one of the various side roads.

"How do we even know he'll be here?" asked the boy.

"Did you read the reports?" asked Attila.

"Yeea- no. No."

"Always read the paperwork, always do the paperwork. A good job is like a good cupcake. You try to follow the recipe and get the right ingredients, but you also adapt and see what actually happens. Don't jump to the frosting before the cake itself is done. Got it?"

"Got it."

"You get a cupcake after we finish."

Attila grabbed the boy and shoved him in a barrel. He ducked into an alley. Moments later, an old man walked by. Moments later, Attila

stepped back out of the alley, right behind the old man. The wizened elder turned around.

"Looking for something, pops?" asked Attila.

"How did you know I'd be here?" asked the old man, eyes wide.

"There's not a place on Earth where the sun don't shine. The sun knows all, sees all."

"What do you want from me?"

"What do I want? Well, I want your head. But Punzie, she's so sweet and nice, she convinces me... eh, this guy is alright. You don't have to off him. And you know, she's so sweet about it that I agree. But really, if it was up to me, you'd already be a smear. It's okay, we're just here to talk. You like talking, right?"

"I don't want to talk!"

"Sure, you do. You talk allll the time. Talk about how much of a tyrant our dear, sweet Punzie is. You know, that's not really nice to say to such a kind girl. That's... well, that's downright slanderous. I don't take kindly to slander. It could make a very nice girl very very sad. I don't like that."

"Do anything, just let me li-"

"Lie some more? I don't think I will. I think... I think I'll make some breakfast."

Attila pulled out an entire leg of pork, and began to rip it apart with his bare hands. The old man watched, his jaw gaping open, his eyebrows oscillating, as if unsure of whether to show shock, disbelief, or fear.

"Pork's a funny thing. It's a good meat. It's a tasty meat. Pork has almost the same properties as human flesh. You ever have prosciutto? I make a prosciutto that's heavenly. And my honey-

glazed ham? Well, it's to die for. I love talking cuisine. It's my favorite subject."

"Ummm... ummmm..."

"Well, if you're not hungry enough for breakfast, that's fine. Run along now. I'm glad we had this talk."

Attila slapped the man forward, and he ran off into the night. Attila walked back to the barrel and opened it.

"Catch all that?" asked Attila.

"Yeah. I don't think I understand," said the youngster.

"You don't have to kill a man to change his mind. In fact, not killing him usually helps."

"Alrighty."

"He's going to be confused. What happened just now was absurd. So maybe he thinks he had a weird dream. Then he wakes up, checks the foot of his bed... note saying that the sun shines everywhere. Boom. Changed man."

"So we just intimidated someone's gramps."

"Yeah. Did it stylish too. We had our bad cop, me, then we had our good cop. Thing is, I'm an unreliable source. He doesn't even know if there's a good cop, he's just got an implied good cop. One less thing he can trust."

"Seems kinda... sketchy."

"People want freedom, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Bullshit. People think they want freedom. You know your life up until now? The one spent as a poor piece of shit on the streets, robbing and stealing? That's a free life. I know, I lived it. No rules for me, no limits except my own strength. I like it better this way. People don't want to be free. They want to be happy and safe. So I keep them happy. Revolutions make things dirty, get blood on everything. They make it real hard to bake for a good long time."

Attila shoved a doormat aside with his foot, knocked a gargoyle head, then reached down into a grate and twisted some odd device hanging barely out of sight. A secret door opened. Attila was the fourth Security Director so far in Rapunzel's long reign. The previous had died the way all good secret policemen did: of old age, surrounded by friends and family. After each changeover, things had gotten a bit hectic, with malcontents taking advantage once they smelled chaos. It was regrettable. Nobody knew who Attila was behind the mask. He never took it off. Most cupcakes were ordinary. Every once in a while, though, you got that one special cupcake with the special, secret flavor. Those little miracles made it all worth it.

"So why me?"

"Because the sun shines everywhere, don't you get that? You really think you made a clean break with all those robberies? Nah. The police might not find you, but we can. We put you on a short list, had you tailed."

"And then why pull me out?"

"I decided you were a good kid. Don't prove me wrong."

"What if I said no?"

"Nobody says no to the secret police. Trust me. Besides, you're telling me you'd turn down money from the black budget? Those are clean bills, my friend. Not a hand has touched them, except for maybe the king's."

"So you're relying on my greed."

"Ah, ah, ah. What were you before this? Just another urchin down a long road to Nowheresville, population Dead. You got family, right? I bet they're as poor as you. Bet a lot of them are in a shitty place, but aren't nearly as skilled as you. You telling me you won't give them a bit of change?"

"... I will."

"That's what we're counting on. Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. We give them money straight, they squander it. You give it? Maybe they see you, decide to make something of themselves. We got education now, but some folks... they're always gonna fall through the cracks. The secret police is there to catch them. Ending poverty one urchin at a time."

"It sounds so noble. I know you're full of it."

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. But you're in deep now, and you better get learning."

"So what do I have to learn?"

"Theft. Forced entry. Assassination. Intimidation. Lying. Cheating. All sorts of fun stuff. I expect you to reach proficiency, and maybe master one or two."

"And if I master them all?"

Attila laughed heartily.

"Then I teach you how to bake, kid."

Attila occasionally took sick days. After one of them, he brought in an entire tray of fresh cupcakes. They tasted delightful. Attila smiled behind the mask, and settled in for another twenty years.

Attila looked at his mask. It was only steel, yet it had defined who he was for so long. Even with it gone, it would still define him.

But he would not be the mask, only the material.

He would be a man of steel.

Despite all the charges and accusations leveled at him, most of them justly made, none would ever call him a bad baker. He held many dinners over his life. Every time, the baking was good.

"Attila is dead," he murmured to himself.

Joseph Stalin. That was a name.

Maturity: Interlude

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon

There are few things more startling than finding strangers in your own home. Theoretically, though, there shouldn't have been anyone in the palace like that. The facts of the matter were staring her in the face. There were two little midgets standing in the hall, one blonde, the other brunette. Elsa had only the slightest idea of who they were.

They were her children, and they were strangers.

The boy saluted and the girl curtsied. At least the nanny had taught them some sort of manners. Still, Elsa still had trouble with proper introductions. Almost instinctively, she fell back to the only way she knew how to open up to family.

"Do you want to build a snowman?" asked the Queen.

"No, thank you. I prefer to play army men," said the boy.

"Ooh, can I be Corona this time?" asked the girl.

"Sure! I'll be Russia."

And with that, the two left, the boy marching with hands folded behind his back, the girl happily skipping.

Elsa looked very much like a deer in headlights.

Little boy blue and the man on the moon

Napoleon was sitting across Elsa's desk, his blonde curls falling into his eyes. He had his fingers steepled, and his inquisitive eyes looked right into Elsa's.

"I can do calculus, mom," said Napoleon.

"Very good," said Elsa, as her mouth squirmed.

"I... uhhhh... I've really applied myself to my studies."

"Yes. Very good. Your favorite food is... foie gras."

"Yes. You enjoy Hadyn's compositions."

"I do."

"I've brushed up on finance and resource allocation."

"Yes, you have. That's good."

Elsa stared at her fingers. Napoleon blinked. He blinked again. Then he blinked around five times in quick succession, and mumbled something. Elsa didn't quite hear, but she nodded as if she did. Napoleon coughed softly.

"I like our gallery," said Elsa's son.

"It's very nice."

A functionary opened the door.

"Your majesty? The new ironworks requires your attention," said the man.

Elsa waved her hand, pushed out her chair, and stood up. She started towards the door, but Napoleon toddled out from his seat and hugged her. It lasted only a few moments before he let go, never having made eye contact with the woman twice his height.

Neither of them understood the hug, or could come up with a reason for it.

When you comin' home mom?

"Do you think mommy has another family?" asked Napoleon.

"I dunno. Pass me another bucket of men," said Elsa Maria.

Napoleon complied, and Elsa Maria seized a handful of miniatures. She deployed her little army, trying to probe the weaknesses of the dread fortress dominating the field. It would be difficult to take ground.

"She's never around. I think she's ashamed of us," said Napoleon.

"Okay, so then what?" asked little Elsie.

"Well... I haven't thought of that yet."

They rolled dice, and Napoleon took initiative. He brought his cavalry and prepared to launch a flanking maneuver. Elsa Maria scowled.

"That's not fair, Nappy. You never play fair!"

"Fog of war, it's totally fair. You just never take it into account."

"Well, you're just a meanie."

Elsa Maria made her roll, and smiled as it came to a rest. Perfect! With a smug smirk, she replaced the elegant black-dressed woman at the head of her army with a fearsome dragon. Then she swept her arm across the field, removing silver knights and stout crossbowmen left and right. She shot her brother a glance as if to say "Your move."

Napoleon cocked an eyebrow, and calmly moved his leader forward. He picked up the dice and threw them to the side, not even bothering to check the result. He looked back at his sister, who was clapping with glee.

"I win, I win, I win! I'm the winner, you're the loser! Loooooooooser!"

"Check the dice."

"Pff, that's not nearly a good enough roll. Maleficent has invulnerability saves."

"Sword of Truth."

"What?"

"Check the rulebook. Sword of Truth."

She frantically grabbed at the book and flipped through the pages as quickly as she could, practically tearing them with her frenetic exertion. Finally, she came to the page on the Prince Phillip unit. Tears were already welling up in her eyes as she unceremoniously dropped the book.

"You couldn't let me win! Not once! Every time, you have to be the winner! Never me!"

"Elsie, shhhh... it's okay... calm down..."

"No, it's not okay! If mom were here, she'd... she'd..."

Elsa Maria doubled over, sobbing. Napoleon crossed the table and embraced her.

"Why isn't mom here? Why isn't she ever here?" pleaded Elsa Maria.

"I'll bring her back, Elsie. I promise. She'll be proud of us."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm always sure."

Napoleon smiled.

I don't know when, but we'll get together then son

"What are you doing with that?" asked Elsa.

"What does anyone do with a barrel of gunpowder?" said Anna.

"Hopefully not another crazy misadventure, is what."

"Nah, nothing like that. I'm just going to fight in the Australian bush for a year. It'll be fun."

"Wait, what?"

"Aus... trai... lia... it's a death continent in the mysterious Orient. It'll be fun."

"Death continent."

"Yeah, a war has broken out between the settlers and a bunch of bloodthirsty savages."

"Bloodthirsty savages. Death continent. Are you even listening to yourself?"

"No, not really. Anyhow, I'm taking Nappy and Elsie."

"Wait, what?"

"Gotta pop those cherries some day."

"No, they do not have to 'pop those cherries'! That's disgusting!"

"You can't keep them safe forever."

"Maybe I can try! Who are you to say I can't?"

"Your sister, and I'm saying they're going to have some quality family time."

"Quality time? You call that quality time?"

"Yes, I do. Quality time like we should've had growing up."

"Not that kind of quality time. They don't need to see any of that. They need to stay safe and sound."

"Gonna stick them up in a tower then?"

"No, but... I... I can't let them see me like this. I can't let them know... who I am... it's..."

"We live dirty lives. Can't pick who your parents were, so might as well get them used to it. They're royalty. Say it with me, ro-yal-ty. It's a way of life. You have to let them go."

"I should be better. I should be a good role model. I should be able to show them my work without feeling ashamed! I might be messed up, but I should give them a chance to be good."

"Elsa... you can't keep doing this to yourself, or them."

"So that's it then? Your final decision."

"Yeah, it is. Don't worry, me and Kristoff know our way around a warzone. They'll be safe. I promise."

You can kick dirt on dirt, and nothing will show. Get some dirt on a snowball, though, and it'll sit there, staring back. Some things are simply too pure for an imperfect world.

Elsa reached her hand out towards the harbor, and wished that she could freeze the one thing she never could.

Time stops for no man.

You know we'll have a good time then

She had squandered the precious little time she had. He wasn't her precious little boy anymore, he was Major Napoleon Bonaparte,

Coronan Light Infantry, hero of the Russo-Turkic War, recipient of the Iron Cross.

He had come home to ask for 5 million thalers to finance French rebels. Elsa agreed. Charles X fell, but the rotten corpse lived a while longer. It was not yet time.

The staff kept the halls nicely tidy. It was quite easy.

You know we'll have a good time then

It was far too dangerous. Anna was completely right, though. They were nearly forty now, and it wasn't right for her to try and stop them. So why did she want to try so badly? Why was she being so irrational? Stupid, stupid, stupid. The walls were closing in on her.

Weeks passed.

Then came the news. Her son had been shot.

She turned ashy gray. She stepped forward, then fell. She curled up, clutched at her own heart, and tried to gasp out a few words. She was unsuccessful. Her sister rushed to her side and tried to resuscitate, with no success. The body chilled, turned blue, then froze solid.

Elsa Hohenzollern died as she lived: curled up in a little ball, surrounded by a puddle of her own tears, controlled by fear, with her sister trying desperately to save her from herself.

Such was the death of one of the most saintly and heroic figures of the 19th century. In the end, almost every move had been vindicated. Biologists discovered the usefulness of a clean water supply. New industry brought money, which brought good health, food, and education. Her policy of mass inoculation had kept millions of children from dying. One by one, her policies spread from nation

to nation, bringing an end to some of the worst miseries the world had ever seen.

We do not praise the dead for their sake. No amount of mourning or eulogizing can help them. But these little rituals remind us that life is worth living. That these dead existed once, and that they helped the world far beyond what was due by right from them. That each life that flickers into the world does not diminish the brightness, but rather increases it. If their life was worthwhile, then...

So was ours. And so we slip the coin onto the tongue, and we pray.

And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me

He'd grown up just like me

My boy was just like me

And then the hourglass was turning. On March 3, 1890, Napoleon II was on a carriage ride, silently pondering the many failures of his son. Weary of disappointment, he took a nap and never woke up. Across the sea, his sister decided to retire to her room early. She watched dusk break over the Arendelle sea, and she slipped away with the tide.

Over the next decade, the French Empire would abandon its defensive strategy and consider the merits of sustained offense.

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon

Little boy blue and the man on the moon

When you comin' home son?

I don't know when, but we'll get together then son

You know we'll have a good time then

Man of Blood: Interlude

" By the time my mother was ten, she was exploring the finer points of proofs and non-Euclidean geometry. By the time I was ten, I was studying calculus and the Amiot's translation of the Art of War. By the time my son was ten, he had learned how to play jacks.

By the time my mother was forty, she had presided over one of the most successful industrializations in history, second only to Britain's. I was claiming my birthright. And my son...?

He had discovered how to jack with himself!" - Napoleon II

A great mind given low expectations will fall into mediocrity. A low mind given great expectations will fall into madness.

From the day he was born, Napoleon III was a disappointment to his father. Although they had tried rather hard for rather long, Napoleon II was 37 before his first child was born. The child was christened Josephine Christine Bonaparte-Hohenzollern.

Only three years later, Napoleon III was born. The childbirth would prove to be difficult, and the midwife advised Napoleon II against further conceiving of children, lest unfortunate consequences occur. That was the first of many signs. Soon afterwards, Empress Gotha fell into post-partum depression. Napoleon II was not a happy man.

As Napoleon III grew, the elder Napoleon found more reason to dislike him. Genius is a peculiar thing. Though intelligence is heritable, over time, a regression to the mean is inevitable. For example, Rapunzel had a piercing, if eccentric, intellect. Of her children, only Elizabeth Christine and Eugene would inherit it, and Eugene's gift would be coupled with impatience, dilettantism, and an even more manic temper. Elsa's parents had not been particularly intelligent. Anna was not very smart either. Yet Elsa had a genius

that only appears in one in every thousand, and a will to use that genius. Both her children would have that gift.

Napoleon III would not. He was most certainly not a genius, though he was not stupid either. His mind was of a very ordinary kind. Napoleon II looked upon this and found it despicable. It was yet another sign of weakness. He would show him mathematical problems, have him write essays, study diplomacy, steward financial assets, even attempt the arts, anything to find a spark of talent. There was none. The son would grow to hate the large and unfulfilled demands of the father. And the father would hate the meanness and ordinary nature of the son.

Napoleon II was not a Frenchman. He had been reared in Arendelle, had made his career in Corona, and had come to France already a mature and well-formed man. While his countrymen loved him, and he loved them, he was not of their breed. This was not true of Napoleon III. The boy had been born in France, and his heart held a French spirit. Both of them loved France, yet their ideas of love were far different. It is not so hard to turn love into hate, for the emotions are not so different. This became painfully apparent when Napoleon III sat in on his first meeting of state. There was trouble in the south. The Occitanian culture continued to flourish, and in this new age of nationalism, that was a very dangerous thing indeed. Napoleon II's chosen course of action was reeducation, cultural suppression, and a steady destruction of the dialect. Voices were raised against this decision, and one of them was his son's. This was another sign.

Napoleon III was a Frenchman, but his veins did not flow with French blood, and for that, he was eternally resentful. When he was a child, he would learn of his father's ceding of Alsace-Lorraine, and he would grow hateful. It was not right for France to bow to Corona. Once, France had dictated terms, not only to Corona, but to the entire continent. That memory was the very reason for his name! And yet his father had prostrated himself like a common dog. And his mother... his mother was one of the German whores. She did not

prepare hearty and proper French meals. She cooked Polish and German dishes. She didn't speak a bit of French.

Poor Gothel. The woman would have been content with a simple life. If Elizabeth Christine had been the thinker, Victoria the charmer, and Eugene the fighter, then Gothel had inherited her mother's love of art and simple housework. She was pious and particularly unambitious, and wished only to be a good wife and mother.

She became the target of her own son's impotent rage. How else could he express his frustrations against the German people? He had no real money. His father's constant sternness and disappointment had molded the boy into a sullen and rebellious man, a man not easily liked. The men of France did not respect him either, seeing him as only his father's pup, giving him no force to take on some wild adventure. So he used what limited power he did have on the only target he could reach.

One day, Napoleon II decided to surprise his beloved wife. He grabbed her on the shoulder, only for her to recoil and turn around with the fear-struck eyes of a scared doe. The gears of Napoleon II's mind turned quickly, and in mere moments he comprehended.

The boy was no mere failure. He was a demon child.

A monster.

He regretted that he had not put the signs together earlier, for they lay in clear writing.

What options were available for him, though? If it was an earlier age, it would've been easy. Peter the Great had forced his own son into exile, and later tortured him to death. Catherine the Great made her son's life a living hell, and put into motion a conspiracy that would destroy him. Qin shi Huang exiled his heir apparent to a frontier guard position, and he would later be forced into suicide. Assassins, exiles, and dungeons, these were tools to be used on hated children. If it was a later age, it would have been easily done as well. Stalin let

his only son perish in captivity. He didn't trade privates for generals, after all. Yet in this day and age, killing or exiling your children was generally frowned upon. Taking clear actions to punish him would cause political fallout, as the people and foreign nations saw that everything was not quite right in the House of Bonaparte, and the succession became less clear. Assassinations of important people, at least, were investigated quite thoroughly, and if he kept his own men away, foreigners would grow suspicious and send their own spies to find out the news.

So Napoleon III took the only course available to him. He locked his son out of the palace and sent him away to a distant estate. He closed the doors and barred the windows to his heart. His child would be protected from this beast and his unnatural ways. His wife would suffer no longer. The father and his former son would never speak again. Napoleon II would be left to brood on this greatest of disappointments.

And in exile, Napoleon III's hatred would only grow. WWI was a cousin's war, but more than that, it was a war between two men so very alike in temper and belief, yet so diametrically opposed in goal. There they were, two twins of different fathers, two branches of a twisted tree of royalty growing deep above Europe, with the Nidhoggr nipping at their heels.

It is fashionable to place all the blame for WWI at Corona's feet. Yet, if not for French pressures, the Balkans situation could have been contained. Ultimately, it takes two to tango. For war to occur, peace must be made intolerable.

Mao's Dilemma: Interlude

" In game theory, the Nash equilibrium is a solution concept of a non-cooperative game involving two or more players, in which each player is assumed to know the equilibrium strategies of the other players, and no player has anything to gain by changing only their own strategy." - Wikipedia

Mao and Gerhardsen both had decisions to make.

Infrastructure does not last forever. Much is made of talent, natural resources, education, and entrepreneurial drive. With such glamorous aspects of prosperity on the table, it is all too easy to forget the essential role of infrastructure. A city without a proper water and sewage system will fester with disease. A city without a power supply is hauled back to the dark days of the pre-modern era. A nation without good roads cannot move resources and people to where they are needed. A nation without rails finds transport of goods more expensive than it should be. A nation without ports is hard-pressed to export significant value. Infrastructure is the bedrock upon which the nation rests.

Norway's infrastructure was in a woeful state of decay. Much of it dated back to the monarchist era, and a great deal of it was merely continuously maintained projects dating all the way back to Queen Elsa the Magnificent. Few had bothered to pay attention to these most humble of things while the revolution blazed. In every workplace, there is always one person with indispensable knowledge. Kill that person, then kill every person they worked with. Now try to imagine reconstructing what he knew. With many of the old hands dead, fled, or imprisoned, there was a dire lack of expertise pertaining to the workings of Norwegian infrastructure. The old pillars that supported the country were falling apart. Something had to be done.

Mao favored a rapid reconstruction and mass diversion of resources towards rebuilding the country's infrastructure. This would allow for the re-opening of the shuttered factories, and the revitalization of the country in rapid order. Gerhardsen preferred a slow, but steady rebuilding, with care taken to keep society running as it was now, just in case efforts fell through. Most labor would remain on farms and only a small amount would be redirected towards repair.

As stated before, divisiveness kills. These two most powerful of men could not be seen disagreeing. This would invite the depredations of disloyal subordinates and hungry outsiders.

Four possibilities now opened up. Both men had extensive contacts in the nation's security apparatus. The reorganization of the entire south of Norway into the Hordaland-Ostlandet Semi-Autonomous Region had given them a great deal of freedom from the Soviet yoke. If they both lived, and agreed to compromise, neither would really get what they wanted, but the country would move along, and moderate benefits from both ways could be reaped, but neither man would receive as much credit as desired. If, on the other hand, one had the other removed, they would reap all the benefits of their method, and get all the credit for the reforms. But if they both acted to eliminate the other, then both men would die, and the country would fall into chaos and civil war. Their legacy would be one of political anarchy.

Such was Mao's dilemma.

There is also the problem of information.

Einar Gerhardsen made his gambit. He openly broadcast his intentions to go to a secluded, unguarded cabin in the woods. His men spread the message. Mao's men confirmed it. Everything checked out. Einar was going to cooperate. Would Mao cooperate or assassinate?

The Nash equilibrium for such a game would have both men attempt to kill each other. Now that Einar had openly declared his intention to

cooperate, Mao could assassinate without risk, and reap all of the rewards. The hypothetical game theory man in his position would take that chance and exploit it. Mao signed an order to the Norwegian Red Guard.

Einar had changed the game. Mao **could** assassinate without consequence. But what Einar had effectively done was eliminate his own power to act. By declaring non-action beforehand, he had twisted the nature of the thing. This was not the Prisoner's Dilemma.

As was fitting for such men, it had now become the Dictator's Game. Rather than two actors competing, one simply decided the fate of the other. The perfectly rational actor would take everything. However, people are not simulations. Most people will give the other person in the game something. Gerhardsen knew this. So did Mao.

Theoretical games occur in theory. In practice, there is a value given to appearing generous and acting altruistically. People do not always maximize their rewards. This might be seen as an aberration and sign of mankind's inferior mental capabilities, but altruism evolved because it was useful. Appearing altruistic had political benefits.

Mao knew this. He was not Stalin. He was able to charm at times, to even amass loyal friends. When he fell from grace and Red China collapsed, his personal connections allowed him to make an escape, and to take his friends with him. There was value in sparing foes and rewarding friends. An erasure, once made, cannot be undone. Better to simply tear the offending page out and store it somewhere safe. If needed, a bit of tape and glue could restore it.

Still, there was a great deal of prestige at stake. The letter made its way to a secret meeting place, where the most loyal of Mao's supporters sharpened their blades.

Gerhardsen chose to cooperate.

By doing so, he was trading away his ability to act, betting that the tendency towards altruism in a one-sided game would save him. It

was a dangerous move to make.

Prestige is not the only side of politics. There is also blame.

Mao's men made their way towards the snowy cabin.

By going passive, Gerhardsen had ensured that the prestige would go to Mao, the acting party. At the same time, if plans went awry, Gerhardsen could be blamed, and Mao's supporters would be able to claim a more complete Great Leap would've succeeded. In short, Gerhardsen had already traded away all of his upside and prevented all of Mao's downside.

Which meant he was no longer a threat. Gerhardsen knew this. So did Mao.

The soldiers surrounded the cabin, formed a perimeter, and guarded Gerhardsen. After a few days, he returned from the North Mountain and signed Mao's compromise bill.

Mao chose to cooperate.

By placing his life in Mao's hands, Gerhardsen had changed the rules of the game. He had given Mao every reason to spare him, which meant that Mao won either way. Mao, being less bloodthirsty though just as ruthless as Stalin, was willing to take such a deal. It was in his best interests as well, as it allowed him to keep a scapegoat if things went badly. At the same time, Gerhardsen knew Mao's health was poor. The man did not properly bathe or take care of his teeth. His body was failing him. Gerhardsen would not gain prestige here, but he already had enough, and he also had power. All that was necessary to win was to survive.

One does not take over a country with a thousand men by being stupid. One does not earn the title "Father of the Fatherland" by being stupid.

In tournament play of the Prisoner's Dilemma, the winning AI is not the one that plays according to the Nash Equilibrium.

A slave chooses. A man trusts.

Moscow Blues: Interlude

Alexander I outlived his wife by only a few years. While on returning from a trip from Arendelle, he caught cold. The disease worsened, and in 1829, he died of pneumonia. He was 52. Elsa would weep bitterly at his funeral, but most of the Russian nobility would make only a token showing of sadness. He had been a mercurial and domineering man, and his unpredictability coupled with his high standards made work under him very difficult.

Nicholas had renounced his claim to the Russian throne when he married Elsa Maria. Unfortunately, neither brother particularly desired the throne. As such, a civil war was briefly fought in Russia to decide which of the brothers would receive the crown, a game of thrones where both sides wanted to lose. Compared to most other such events, this was relatively bloodless, and it was over quickly, with only a few dozen killed or executed. Constantine won, or rather, lost.

Constantine's first marriage had been arranged by Catherine the Great, but it was unhappy and ending in a decade long separation before annulment. Constantine had been very much in favor of the Franco-Russian alliance, and its breaking of it had left a sour taste in his mouth. With peace restored following the invasion, Constantine visited the Coronan court. There he met Countess Grudzinska, the love of his life. Less than a year later, in 1810, he had his previous marriage annulled, and married the Countess.

After the succession, Grudzinska and her future heirs were allowed to retain their property, on the condition that the title would be lost if Russia and Corona ever engaged in hostilities. Furthermore, Rapunzel silently seized more control over the local administration, effectively turning it into a crown holding. Constantine didn't particularly care. This would become a running theme of his nine year rule.

Constantine had a great deal of good will from the people of Russia, coming from both his bravery in battle, and his opposition to his brother's more ruthless and amoral policies. This good will was never completely squandered, but much of it was wasted. Constantine did not care for rule, so he did not rule. He simply periodically sent letters to the army telling them to suppress dissidents and maintain the status quo, which they did efficiently. For that, he acquired a reputation as a ruthless blackguard and tyrant. In truth, he was neither, he simply did not understand the mechanisms of rule and did not care to learn.

First and foremost, he was a family man. He would come to dearly love his adopted homeland of Corona, and over the years would thoroughly reform himself into the very model of a Polish noble. He had two sons, who were roughly as able as he was, and who he loved very much. He was reasonably pleasant, and he spent much of his time at the royal palace socializing. Many especially loved his down-to-earth and frank manner of speaking, refreshing from such a powerful man. Such a manner had come at a very steep price. He was down-to-earth because he had little real awareness of what his position actually meant. Many months, all he did with Russia was take his living income from it. It was a modest sum, as he lived somewhat frugally, but that was not the problem. The problem was his conspicuous and constant absence, leaving Russia completely rudderless. He did not wield an iron fist in a velvet glove because he had no fist at all.

His brother's works, which had taken so much to create, were not destroyed. But they were not nourished either. The reforms lay as seeds, ungerminating but unwithered. Constantine would leave Russia essentially as he had found it. This does not sound so bad, but it was an era of rapid economic advancement, social upheaval, and revolutions in the art of war. As the world moved into the modern age, Russia stayed put.

Alexander was rolling in his grave.

He was succeeded by his eldest son Pawel. Pawel was an easy-going man, weak of will and forgiving. Pawel was the kind of man who believed in compromise and reasonableness. If forced to make a decision between two parties, he would simply pick the middle position, regardless of the arguments backing each side. In a good compromise, no one is happy.

Pawel would abolish serfdom, not because of any great moral need, but simply because every other country had, and it seemed very odd to be left out. Soon, very many nobles were angry at him. Pawel did not feel the need to send military force after these dissenters, nor did he feel the need to protect the newly-freed serfs. Many nobles took their revenge on their former subjects, ignoring their supposed rights as free men. The serfs grew to hate Pawel too.

After only three years, he was assassinated.

He would be succeeded by his brother Aleksy. Aleksy had one main goal in life, and that goal was to enjoy sunshine. Russia was not a very sunny place. Thus, Aleksy fell back onto his second biggest goal in life-to be lazy. Being dead is not conducive to being lazy, except in a most perverse way. That was not the laziness Aleksy was looking for. He would adopt a policy of simply not shaking the boat. He would find out what interests powerful players had, and then ignore those interests as fervently as he could. The serfs would not really get a better lot in life as free men, but that didn't matter. No more changes would be forthcoming. Aleksy lived reasonably well. He ate fine food when he could, and supped lightly when health dictated he could not feast. He married a woman who did not really love him, nor him her, but who was pleasant and willing to get by regardless, and they had children that were not really disappointing, but not special either. Another twenty-five years passed with nothing happening.

He was succeeded by his son Michael, who would be known as Michael the Drinker or Old Man Michael. Michael was a firm believer in autocracy and the limitless power of the crown. Michael was also

a man very unsure in his desires. This would prove to be the foundation of an enduring Russian joke.

Michael would call for his courtiers, and loudly proclaim his power. They would ask for what he wanted. He would not be able to answer. After a few moments, a courtier would supply him with a bottle of vodka, and the Tsar would burst into tears.

"How did you know what he wanted?" the others would ask.

"Michael wants to drink. That's always what he wants," would respond the main courtier.

Needless to say, he was not very respected. Power without action is farce. Still, he would keep the peace for many years, even at home. Violent suppression of rebels became mostly a thing of the past, although media was still heavily restricted. Freemen would even see their actual rights almost reach the level of their nominal ones.

He did not marry and had no children. For this, many would simply assume he was gay. Perhaps he even was. However, no evidence has been found for lovers of any kind, let alone male ones. His biggest hobby was the delivery of droning, monotone speeches. These would go on for hours at a time, much to the consternation of the courtiers. Such was the character of the last Tsar.

As he grew older, and the chance of a legitimate heir dwindled into nothing, the nobility decided to arrange a smooth succession. The crown was to pass to a distant cousin, a man named Nicholas, after his great-grandfather. He and his family lived in Arendelle, but soon would travel to and fro from Russia.

The people were not pleased. All of the promise of Alexander I had evaporated, leaving only salty disappointment and stagnation. The world had changed. Dumpy old buildings had been replaced by glittering steel towers to touch the sun, and soft hands were replaced by mechanical ones. Yet Russia remained the same. Now the throne was being passed to a foreign man, one that did not even belong to

the motherland, a stranger in a strange land. The political machine of the nation was the club of a few old men, woefully out of touch. The bankrupting of the country to fight a war based on bizarre dynastic ties and ancient alliances forged for the sake of outsiders was the last straw.

The Tsarist government fell.

At the time of the revolution, Nicholas was already preparing to return to Arendelle. When he heard the cacophony of crowds in the distance, he finished packing and had his family early. He did not realize the revolution had come. He simply didn't want to be caught in some petty peasant riot.

He arrived at the railway station, and his ticket was accepted. They could have been stopped there. However, the station master was tired. Last night, he and his wife had argued well into the wee hours over the placement of a new couch. He had slept through the morning's commotion, and was completely unaware of the chaos. His employees had deserted the station, and begrudgingly he handled the boarding of the family himself. He would have an egg salad sandwich for lunch that day.

They crossed over to the Swedish border, but were stopped at Customs. However, the border agent was snagged into a conversation about soccer, and soon lost track of the fact that he was supposed to be working. After all, the crossing in question was usually a very lonely one. When the shift change occurred, the agent forgot to tell the next worker to deny their passage, and Nicholas simply claimed the family was approved. They crossed.

And a helmeted man would worm his way into Lenin's circle. He had lost everything following WWI and the end of the old Coronan secret police. Still, he was resourceful. Attila was granted a position inspecting new recruits.

He would rise like the break of the Red Dawn.

Manuscript: Interlude

Elsa lifted the page tenderly with her gloved hand. She was careful not to put much force into the movement. One bit of pressure too much, and the paper might crumble into dust. By weight, the book was more valuable than gold. Inside lay the handwritten artistry of a bygone age.

"Whatcha doing, Elsa?" asked Anna.

"Looking at medieval manuscripts. I'm writing a book on medieval history," said Elsa.

"Wow, that's cool! I'm so glad I have such a smart sister," said Anna.

"Right now I'm trying to figure out the symbolism behind all these knights fighting snails."

"Symbolism?"

"Yeah, behind the knights fighting snails."

"Why can't they just be giant snails?"

"That's ridiculous."

"I'm sure we do a bunch of ridiculous stuff too! Would you want someone to just ignore that because it's ridiculous?"

"Our ridiculous stuff is better documented and also perfectly rational."

"This is the only way they had to document things, so it is well-documented."

"It's a bunch of storybook nonsense, outrageous creatures, and magic."

"You're magic..."

"I... uhh... well... that's different. You can't seriously be asking to use those old fairy tales as evidence."

"Why not?"

"Because... the Seven Electors of the Holy Roman Empire who are also dwarves help Snow White elope against the wishes of her father, breaking the power of the old dynasty and allowing the Hapsburg rise to power... sounds... stupid. That's it, okay? It sounds dumb!"

"Why does it sound dumb?"

"Doc, Grumpy, Happy, Dopey, Sneezy, Bashful, Sleepy."

"Bohemia, Palatinate, Mainz, Trier, Brandenburg, Saxony, Cologne!"

"Damnit, Anna."

Elsa put the book down. Rapunzel walked on.

"Everybody having fun?" asked Rapunzel.

"Yup," said Elsa.

"Yeah," said Anna.

"Fantastic!" replied Punzie.

"What would've happened if we said no?" asked Elsa.

The world went still, as if afraid to take a breath. The light was suddenly snuffed out, a dark filter placed on God's lens. Elsa breathed in softly, and it tasted beige. Rapunzel's eyes shrank into tiny white dots, piercing in hateful intensity.

"You took my army on a joyride. This is not orderly. So it would be the racks. The screws would be placed. Bones would crunch. The rack would tighten. You would stretch. Your back would be broken against the spikes. The pain would become too much. You would die. Your heads would be removed. They would be placed on my mantle. I would make them one with me. We would recreate the body of the Ur-Mother together. And together our mouths would open, and we would sing the song that ends the Earth," droned Rapunzel.

Then everything was suddenly normal again, and Elsa exhaled.

"Of course, I would try to make that fun! I could do drawings on you while you stretched! Drawings are fun. Ooh, and stickers! I love stickers. Do you love stickers?" continued Rapunzel.

Eugene stuck his head in from the other room.

"On the scale, I give that a 4/10," said the King.

"Thanks Eugene!" replied Rapunzel. She sighed and placed a hand on her breast. "Isn't he just dreeeamy?"

"Right. I'm glad we cleared that up," said Elsa.

"No problem, that's what cousins are for. I'm so glad we're having fun," said Queen Rapunzel.

"So what's this about a scale?" asked Elsa.

"I'm glad you asked, cuz!" said Rapunzel.

She dropped a thickly bound tome on the table. It was labeled "Relevant Rapunzel Statistics and Data, 1815". Elsa opened it up.

"See, Eugene has a scale which he ranks how crazy the things I do are. So I decided... I use a lot of statistics, why not track that? So I did! And here it is," said Rapunzel.

Sure enough, there were listings of crazy incidents per day, intensity of said incidents, moving averages on crazy per day, projections into the future, median, mode, and range of incidents by day, week, month, and year, and an adjusted Crazy Punzie Index, or CPI. Elsa skimmed the book, finally arriving at a part labeled "Diary Entries".

7 am the usual morning lineup... 7 am the usual morning lineup... 7 am the usual morning lineup... was curious this morning about swimming, had weights attached to a death row inmate before he was dropped in the sea. He treaded water for 3.2 seconds. Cool! 7 am the usual morning lineup... 7 am the usual morning lineup... Suppressed a revolt in Konigsberg today. A couple hundred rebels were making trouble. I had the dragoons bring me their left ears. I don't know what I'm going to do with this sack of ears, but I'm sure I can think of something! 7 am the usual morning lineup... 7 am... 7 am... Played a prank on a political prisoner today. They usually don't get condiments with their gruel, so I filled a bottle with clotted blood and told him it was ketchup. Boy, the look on his face when I told him was priceless! He was pretty good at arts and crafts, he made his clothes into a rope. Did you know people defaecate when they die? I saw it firsthand. 7 am... 7 am... 7 am... Drew a scale version of *The Last Supper* on Eugene's butt while he slept. I don't think he'll notice. 7 am... 7 am... 7 am... He finally noticed. Made a working steam boiler out of metal scraps and glue. 7 am... 7 am... 7 am... Had the chefs make me some dishes from exotic Mexico. Muy caliente! Pushed Steve off the ramparts when he went outside to fart. Steve was a British spy. 7 am... 7 am... 7 am... Hit our ten year plan's goal early. We're a year ahead of schedule! Say goodbye to dead babies! Bye dead babies! Hello increased labor force in two decades! Came up with a new ten year plan while singing in the shower. Held a successful plan party. Gave everyone celebratory ear necklaces I made myself. I wonder if they liked them?

Why did everything weird happen on Thursdays?

Elsa heard frantic squawking coming from the room over. There was also the sound of hoof beats and the ringing of a loud, tinny bell.

"Why is our family so crazy?" whispered Elsa to herself.

"Inbreeding! Wait, was that a rhetorical question?" said Punzie.

"Anyways, me and Elsa were talking earlier... did your parents ever do anything really weird?" asked Anna.

"Hmmm... ummmm... hmmm... oh! I know! Just before my dad died, he told me he had to show me an ancient tradition of our people, one that was sadly dying out. He led me to a field, and we put a fox in a tiny catapult, and shot it into the air. It went 'Yip yip yip yip yip yip yip splorch!' That last bit is the sound a fox makes when it goes splat," said Rapunzel.

"Elsa, what was that about us being rational and not doing silly stuff?" asked Anna.

"Okay... okay. Yeah, you're right. The Hapsburgs rose to power because a princess wanted to marry a Wittelsbach, and dwarf electors fought the Emperor and his wife. Charlemagne founded his empire after he and his paladins used their chivalrous might to slay the giant wizard snails plaguing Europe, and all the babies were super muscular, probably because babies had to work out or something, I don't know. Yeah."

"See, isn't that better? If that was in the history books, I would've paid way more attention to my tutor!" said Anna.

"Don't you mean paid attention at all?" asked Elsa.

"Nope. Chocolate was first shipped commercially to Europe in 1585, heading from Veracruz to Sevilla," recited Anna.

Elsa sighed. The clock struck 7:00PM. Rapunzel looked up.

"Wow, time really flies, huh? Looks like it's time for the next activity station," said Rapunzel.

"Activity station? What activity station? Next? What activity was this supposed to be?" asked Elsa.

"Well, it was going to be painting, but I accidentally used up all our paints. I won the bet though! Hehehe, Eugene thinks he can outsmart me," said Rapunzel.

"I'm not going to ask," said Elsa.

The party moved out into the hall. Eugene, Kristoff, and Sven were already there. Kristoff and Eugene were both wearing shirts that said "#1 Cock Lovers". Sven was wearing a chicken costume. Eugene had a golden trophy full of silver coins. Feathers and tiny blood stains were on their shirts.

"Did you have fun Kristoff?" asked Anna.

Kristoff was about to open the side of his mouth to respond, when Sven started talking.

"There's really nothing like the naked thrill of bloodsport to liven a life. It is the Dionysian impulse bursting from the ether to rend our ordinary ways asunder, revealing the true arbitrariness of society and law. Blood is the rewriting of law and the reforging of soul," said Sven.

"Elsa! I... uhhh... didn't know you did a Sven voice," said Anna.

"I don't," replied Elsa. "What are you talking about?"

"The horrors of war are enough to splinter even the most rational mind. The true evils of the thing must be forced into an alternate persona. It's simple psycho- I LOVE CARROTS NOM NOM NOM NOM MMMMMM SO GOOD KRISTOFF GIVE ME A HUG," said Sven.

Kristoff hugged Sven. Eugene stared at Elsa for a moment, then muttered something about crazy bitches and kept walking. They

came to a junction, and again the men and women parted ways.

Finally, Rapunzel opened a door and they arrived at their destination. There was a tub of meat and a bucket full of sticks there. Rapunzel looked at them expectantly.

"What am I looking at?" asked Elsa.

"Well, you've got the meat and you..." said Rapunzel, stopping halfway through her sentence.

An awkward silence hung for the next ten seconds.

"And you what?" asked Elsa.

"Shhh... you have to let the suspense build," replied Punzie.

"Okay... what...?"

"Shhh..."

"Uhhh..."

"Shhhh..."

"..."

"Sussspppeeeeeeeennnnseeeeeee."

"I'm thoroughly suspended now."

"You take the meat... and you put it on a STICK! Amazing, right?"

"My mind has been blown. Wow. How do you even do that?"

"It's like wizard magic."

"Truly a marvel of our times. Can I take a guess?"

"Sure."

"You take the meat from the bin and you poke the stick through."

"Wow! Anna was right about you being a genius!"

"Thanks?"

For the next hour, they stuck bits of meat onto sticks. Every five minutes, Rapunzel would stop, stand up, and squeal with delight. Anna somehow managed to make a stick into a circle, and the meat into a tiny meatman, which is like a snowman but bloodier and more unsanitary. Elsa wondered if she had died back at Waterloo. Was this Purgatory?

At the end of the hour, Eugene and Kristoff walked in. More accurately, Eugenetoff walked in. The two were slathered head to toe in a mixture of maple syrup, bits of lint, and coconut shavings, and Kristoff was upside down and glued to Eugene's back. Eugene told everyone not to ask. Elsa took his advice.

That night, Anna dreamed of a bomb dropping on a giant snail. It burst into a fireball brighter than a thousand suns, a vision of death and the destruction of worlds. The snail survived.

Make the Clock Reverse: Interlude

" And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

" Or will you go to your knees in fear?" - The Protomen

"Listen to me, son... you must be happy. Not for my sake, but for the sake of Corona. When you are happy, no one can defeat you. Who can hate the happy? Their hearts will naturally be drawn to sympathy, or to fear. If their dreams are shattered, then their dreams will fall into the dark crevices of their heart, and when they see your happiness, it will remind them of their dreams, those now abandoned and vengeful dreams. They will wonder what kind of a man can smile while driving their sword into a heart, and they will fear and flee. If there is love in their hearts, they will find it hard to oppose you if they see love in your eyes. Either way, they are cleaved from their allies. Divide and conquer! If you are always happy, the world cannot make you fearful, for the happy man is not fearful. If the world cannot defeat you, then you will defeat it! If you are happy, you can store the fear the world attempts to give you, and unleash it back on your foes! This is the power of happiness! Happiness makes the will uncrushable! It is as mighty as any army!"

But her son listened without comprehension, and Rapunzel saw the emptiness in his eyes.

She seized the globus cruciger sitting beside her bed and began to chant, all the crowns of Europe glittering in its reflection.

"Flower gleam and glow, let your power shine, make the clock reverse, bring back what once was..."

Her arm went slack and dropped. The globe dropped to the ground and rolled away with a clatter. The sound was drowning out by the weeping of friends and family. And these faces were only graven

ashes, for their light had only been the reflection of the now dark sun.

The last ray of sunshine was now dead.

A storm blew over Europe.

The riders readied their steeds.

The world, like a clock, was locked into a cycle recurring, and no mortal hand could stay its course.

Heal what has been hurt, change the fates' design, save what has been lost, bring back what was once was mine.

What once was mine.

END OF INTERLUDE

MOUNT VESUVIUS: PART TWO

Riley looked at Mount Vesuvius in the bitter orange of sunset. The radio beside him crackled with life.

"And in other news... corn prices reach new highs... tensions continue to rise in Africa as Chinese and French interests compete... rare earth deposits now critically depleted... NASA announces new helium mining colony on the moon... militia continues to hold the Westfield, Downing Street considering use of anti-tank weapons... "

The stories faded in and out of his mind as he chewed the reheated Salisbury steak. Mount Vesuvius stood in solemn judgment.

"I don't want war. Who really does? I just want to build things. Had legos as a kid, y'all know that was a real good time. When I grew up, figured I'd keep going. So I did. Went to Georgia Tech. Good school, I still donate. I don't... don't want war. I just want the threat of war. It's a damn shame, but nobody cares about building when they're not in danger. Look at early NASA just a decade or two ago. They were gonna kill it. Were... gonna... kill it... You know what gets the money? Sputnik. Fear of war. But... I don't want war. I just want to build things. Larger things, bigger things, better things. But when war comes, then I see what I'm really building for. And it's a damn ugly thing, I reckon. But what was I to do? Two old and lonely roads, one open one closed, and a builder passed I. And that's about it," he had said.

And Riley had listened, and then he boarded the train.

Beneath the mountain was ancient Pompeii, a city of storied excellence, ruins steeped with the wisdom of the ancients.

The wisdom of the ancients is the same tired bullshit we spout today. Much of Shakespeare is bawdy and lewd. Only the mystic cloak of

age gives it a transcendental weightiness. But that bawdiness is important. Those Pompeii ruins are important.

It reminds us that the ancients were just like us. It is often said that history is the product of great men, and it is often said that it is the product of great trends. But these are just two readily identifiable causes, tiny dots of order in a sea of blackness. All too often, history is a series of swallowed lies, misremembered facts, convoluted plans that don't quite pan out, incompetence, fragile egos and overinflated emotion, interpersonal drama, stupid mistakes, stupider assumptions, dumb luck, and wild guesses. It is easy to imagine some powerful and wise Prometheus guiding the river of time, but if there is, his careful toil is often overwritten by fools running into each other and pissing in the water. People are greedy, stupid, short-sighted, incompetent as a rule, and narcissistic. Every act of heroism is outnumbered a thousand times over by cowardice, such that one is the rule and something to be planned for, and the other is the stuff of legend.

And yet this is their strength. History is full of monstrosities and inhumanities. Indeed, many of its greatest heroes are also its greatest monsters. The past is full of tiny petty men living tiny petty lives. The fact that this is recognized, however, is significant! Humanity has the ability to conceive of perfection. We have already improved the world so much. Mankind fell from grace once, and it saw God as it fell. The hunter-gatherer idyll was shattered, never to return. And yet mankind endured, and not only endured, but prospered! It clawed its way back to those living standards, then improved upon them. It saw Paradise Lost, and decided to build a better Paradise. And people still complain. This is because they have mankind's inexhaustible ambition. The complainers will never be satisfied because every human being has an image of perfection within, because everything can always improve. That is mankind's strength. And so they are right to complain, for mankind will always reach ahead and strive towards an unreachable perfection, for that is mankind's nature. Perfection is impossible. But the world can come

as close to perfection as is possible, and time and time again, mankind manages to approximate that best possible situation.

When we tell stories of monstrosities, we recognize their terrible and cruel nature. But the fact remains that mankind has always won and not suffered its own doom. It continues to build, to strive onwards and upwards. When we tell stories of monsters, we know that one day, they fall and never rise again. Smallpox has been destroyed. HIV was reduced from a death sentence to a chronic condition, and progress continues on it. Once, cancer was certain death. Starvation and poverty yield to the irresistible logic of industry and science. Houses grow more comfortable, and deserts and mountains are made into homes as comfortable as any green-grass meadow. History is littered with great tragedies, and yet most people would be spared by them. Most people lived their lives, smiling, crying, and hating, just as we do. Do not mourn that you do not live in exciting times, for times were not exciting for most even in hectic eras. If you wish excitement, chase it! It is within your power. When we tell stories of our vices, we recognize that they will one day be conquered, if they are not already. When we tell stories of our virtues, we recognize our progress on an endless journey towards perfection. It will never be reached, but we will still try. We try because humanity is noble. We try because humans are essentially good.

There is no need to tell Humanity, Fuck Yeah! stories because every story is a Humanity, Fuck Yeah! story.

If you despair, it is because you are strong. If you are sad and miserable, it is because you are strong. John Stuart Mill said that the noble character may suffer, but his suffering will lead to a greater happiness. You despair because you have hope. Hope is at the bottom of every Pandora's box. If you are despairing or disappointed, it is because you can implicitly imagine a better future, which means that hope still lives within you. We are all the noble sufferers. Mankind, collectively, suffers, but this is also the source of Mankind's collective happiness. Be sad. Be happy. Either way, you

are strong. Man does not break. It builds. Never give up, never surrender.

I dreamed that life was worth living. I didn't have to wish upon a star for it. It was already true.

I believe in happy endings. So should you.

BEGINNING OF PART TWO

Author Notes: I believe in happy endings. So should you.

Napalm, Nukes, and Nougat

Author Notes: Still not a historian, just a guy doing this as a hobby. It's entirely possible that I have many factual errors. Don't take this as solid history, take it as what it is-a fanfic born out of a silly conversation on a web forum that has expanded a great deal. Ideally, it should still be somewhat plausible, but I am human and make a load of mistakes. Hey look, it's Vietnam. Vieeeetnam. Vietnam.

FF rightly has a policy against writing against the living. If you'd like to learn more about the struggle against cancer (and make no mistake, it is a struggle), I highly recommend *The Emperor of All Maladies* by Siddhartha Mukherjee. Unfortunately, in our world, there are no magic Atlantean crystals.

" So how did you know how to restructure the water supply?"

"I didn't. I guessed. Alexander told me the Russians have a saying. A man who can assess the situation and quickly give orders is a general. And if those orders make sense, he is an excellent one."

- From "Saint in Monster's Skin: A Biography of Elsa Hohenzollern" by Napoleon II Bonaparte

" And it's one! Two! Three! What are we fighting for? Don't ask me, I don't give a damn! Next stop is Vietnam!" - Country Joe and the Fish

No empire can last forever.

Cancer had been called the Emperor of all Maladies. Oppenheimer looked at the fireball, brighter than a thousand suns, and he gloried in the despair. And that solemn Emperor in his jaundiced yellow throne, looked upon it, shuddered, and knew not why. Every empire suffers a final sunset.

A commercial empire built on a monopoly must forever protect its stranglehold. If that hold is built on secret knowledge, then expect it to fail. No knowledge can be kept unknown forever, for knowledge always yearns to spread its wings and fly. So it was with chocolate. State and corporation, time and time again, flirt with distressing closeness. A company asks the country, the country sends its men, and the secrets are stolen. Corporate espionage is just one of many kinds. Like all secrets, corporate ones are often worth killing for. Arendelle needed to expand its industrial base. It had an early dominance of many different chemicals, but that would shrink as competitors entered the market. It needed to diversify. Chocolate was a natural choice. After all, both the Queen and her sister loved it. One needn't worry about whether that cherry filling was really cherry, as the question is hardly relevant.

Following the March Revolts during WWI, France had transitioned into a constitutional monarchy. The ancient rules of French monarchy had been broken, and the throne not only passed through female line, it passed to a woman, Napoleon III's niece, Marie Joan Antoinette, a mousy brown haired woman more suited for a quiet rural library than a throne. And soon enough, the French people thought to themselves about how strange the whole affair had been. If they could abolish one ancient rule, why not another? When France fell in WWII, the monarchy fell and the resistance rose. The former Queen would famously refuse to abandon the continent, and Frenchman after Frenchman would take up arms and fight the occupation. After the war, the crown was not restored. This was not so bad for Marie, by now a very old woman, who had always preferred the calm of a study to the brutal and bloody tranquility of diplomacy. Thus, the French Empire fell. So did the French empire. Unable to hold onto even its homeland, it now found its colonial possessions trickling away.

In distant Vietnam, rebels trained. And soon enough, they had an army professional and numerous enough to challenge the French in direct battle. The French fought hard, but could not win. They turned

to allies. Bombs were requested, and granted. Guns were requested, and granted. Mines were requested, and granted.

Then the French asked for it. Not just a bomb. The bomb. And the Americans could not, would not, would never comply with such a request. Dien Bien Phu fell, and so did French Indochina. Soon enough, the US would have its turn. Communism was spreading around the globe, and Vietnam was yet another domino poised to fall in devastating quickness. If Vietnam fell, then China would be the only unsullied light left in the long, dark Asian night. So a minor incident in Tonkin was blown up into a catastrophe, and the nation was off to war. The war had already been raging for eight years by then. But now it would become an American war.

The cold had always bothered him.

Whenever it got the slightest bit chill, he instinctively found himself bundling up. He wore thick coats and thick jackets, often had a scarf on even in summer. Perhaps that's what drew him to Vietnam. There was a place where he could finally stay warm. It was a humid, draining heat, but it was heat nonetheless.

He came from a family with a history. There was a military tradition in his roots, on both sides as it turned out, although he was only aware of the one. His father was a soldier, and his father's father, and his father's father's father. His own mother was a war bride, a girl met while Pa was in the Pacific, a girl from a clan called Yu, fighting the good fight in the South China campaign. Though his father would never tell the story, they had run into each other when the Chinese Resistance and the Allied army crossed paths in the middle of battle. When she, with her shocking strawberry blonde hair, shouldered a bazooka and blew away a Japanese tank, it was love at first sight. When Vietnam came over the horizon, Uncle Sam threw out the call. Thomas Dalton answered.

The plane touched down in sputtering quickness, and wheels kissed tarmac. The airport was somewhat rundown and ramshackle, and masses of confused soldiers milled about the scene. But there he

was. He was in 'Nam. His outfit was just as ramshackle as the airport. As the war had come to life, Dalton had been going through officer school. Now he was an Lt., with more energy than experience and more sass than sense. But there was the Sarge, a man with a thousand yard stare and a thick-set jaw locked in perpetual scowl. There was the 1st Lieutenant, a man with a handlebar mustache topping his lip and a habit for looking up and backwards, a man who would play it by the book even if there was no book. If necessary, he would write one. Finally, there was the Captain. He had a slow, country-boy drawl, and a tendency to speak little and stop less. He was always pacing, and at the same time, his soft blue eyes would scan the perimeter. He had a pocketwatch that he checked obsessively. Dalton thought he understood the feeling-it was 365 and a wakey before he would be heading back home. He didn't understand at all.

They went on patrols. They went to villages, big and small, but mostly small. They went through dry. They went through wet, and it was mostly wet. They went rain or shine, which was good because the rains lasted forever and a day. The villagers lied to their faces. Charlie was everywhere, in the trees, in the dirt, even in the wretched Asian sky. Charlie was even in them, watching from within darkened hearts. He closed his eyes and dreamed of Charlie.

And every time he heard those gunshots, he was scared shitless. That was the long and the short of it, he would often have to change his pants. Then one day, they were out marching, and someone bumbled into a trip wire. A bomb went off, shattering ear drums and kicking up a cloud of dust. Groans echoed through the confused air, some of them from the dying, some of them from merely dazed. The First Lieutenant told everyone to get down, and he felt the Lt shove him to the dirt. Bullets were flying through the air, from Charlie and from the Americans. He felt him go limp, and just like that, the lieutenant was dead. He started talking to the Cap more after that. He wanted to understand the Cap's mission more, but there was only one order he would ever give.

"Go into the jungle. Kill Charlie. If it's dead, it was probably Charlie. Don't die."

Time passed. They went on another patrol. It was calm. The trees hid Charlie though, they always did. The jungle had goddamn eyes. Dalton's hands fumbled clumsily with his gun. The Captain was scanning the woods, the Captain was always watching. Light travels faster than sound, but gunfire travels faster than body. The Captain's eyes widened in recognition, and synapses fired. His body began to jolt into motion, but it was too slow, and the bullet ripped through his lungs. He coughed up some bloody foam, collapsed, and died. His men returned fire, but with no visible effect. Perhaps some Vietcong were hit, but they always melted away before they could be found. It is rough to do anything without seeing results, even if, intellectually, you are aware that the action has purpose. It saps at morale.

And with no captain, they simply promoted Dalton up to the job. When he came back for his next tour, he was now in charge. Unfortunately, he had no idea of what he was doing. He would come to rely heavily on the Sergeant's practical wisdom, which is to say he would say something stupid quickly, then Sergeant would slap him and come up with a better, more reliable solution. But then, on one of the trips deep into the jungle, they had to clear out the tunnels. The Sarge volunteered, his face a very model for one of the Stoic Greeks of old. He descended into the underworld. Later, one of the men would accidentally fall through the ground into a tunnel. There they found several corpses, the Sarge's hat, his knife, but no Sarge.

Experience is the grim realization that, despite knowing nothing, you were now the most senior person there, in both rank and practical knowledge. And that was that. He was the grizzled veteran now, and he had a duty to his men. Like him, they didn't know what they were getting into.

And at last, he saw how blind he had been before. He got a watch, and started checking it. It wasn't for the watch's sake. It was to keep his hands busy while his eyes worked.

It had started with a simple but potent crystal shard found by Teddy Roosevelt on one of his various escapades. He didn't quite know what it was, but it had potential. In 1902, on the eve of WWI, funds were first allocated to the future Project Ascension, a scientific mission to study this crystal. Following the war, the US government attempted to acquire more of the crystal. A sum of \$1 million in their dollars was prepared. A search was made, and finally a suitable man was found. Through a series of proxies, Rourke and Sinclair were placed into Uncle Sam's employ. They were to find a suitably large crystal and bring it to the government, and not to Whitmore. Succeed, and they would be rich beyond their wildest dreams.

They didn't. Contact with the expedition was lost. Disheartened, research now turned to other ways to acquire new crystal. In 1922, physicists successfully executed a reaction that increased the mass of the crystal. In 1928, they finally produced a working breeder reactor. When the Great Depression came about, however, research was put at a halt.

It would be nine years before it continued. By that time, Franklin Delano Roosevelt would be president. As the Reich continued its rise and radical nationalism spread through Europe, voters rallied around him. This, incidentally, would give him the solid base of support needed to fight polio, which would provide an example and proof of concept for a War on Cancer. With war on the horizon, FDR examined Project Ascension. A retool was needed. Jewish diaspora was flooding to Germany, bringing a great deal of skilled physicists with it. The crystal was the United States' ace in the hole. It was almost certain that the Nazis were working on the Bomb. They had to be beaten to the punch. Project Ascension became an applied science research program, designed to explore military applications of the crystal. With this came a changing of the name. Project Ascension became the Manhattan Project.

Once the US entered the war, intensive firebombings were directed against any city suspected of having a nuclear research lab. Hundreds of thousands of civilians burned alive or were suffocated

as the great firestorms sucked the oxygen out of the world. These acts were not covered up, merely ignored. After all, the Nazis were doing far worse. It was a matter of weighing one atrocity against far greater ones. The United States beat Germany to the Bomb.

And it was used. A week before, pamphlets were airdropped warning the Germans that a reckoning was upon them. Any that valued their lives were advised to immediately flee Berlin. But the citizens had already been through so much, and at any rate, these rumors of a bomb to end all bombs were probably just Allied propaganda.

Besides, there was nowhere to go. The entire country was being torn apart, with Soviets advancing from the east, and the west ravaged by a civil war between the Hohenzollern pretender and Adolf Hitler.

Most stayed. Few would live.

The Bomb came down, stronger than the fist of an angry God. The first stage of the Bomb went off, sending a wave of crystalline energy through the city, causing bodies to start freezing solid. Particles from this reaction hit the uranium core, and the second stage activated. People were thrown into the air by the massive winds, shattering as they fell back to earth. The blast wave spread out, leveling buildings. The Brandenburg Gate was pounded into dust. Innocents were mashed into paste. A firestorm engulfed the ruins. Those outside the blast's immediate who dared look upon this avatar of wrath had their eyes melted out. Their clothes burned into their flesh. Faces dissolved as skin melted off of bodies. Later research indicates that consciousness can be maintained by the remnants of a crystal for several minutes after its immediate destruction, and that pain is still felt. Thus, we can reasonably conclude that they indeed felt it as their crystallizing bodies were finally annihilated and the remains reduced to carbon shadows. In mere moments, that ancient city had been wiped from the face of the earth.

He came up with a system, which is to say, he stole one that he liked. Charlie didn't like to play by the rules. Medics, officers, demolition men, anyone special they could pick out, they would pick

off. So from then on, they were all interchangeable privates, at least outwardly. The person on point would be chosen by random lots, which occasionally wouldn't be random.

One day, while out on a raid, he found a hidden weapons stash in a village. That wasn't so peculiar. What was strange was finding an indicator of its source. It was from a certain "Mary-Jane Greenbury", a name that sounded as far from Vietnamese as you could get. Thomas Dalton committed the name to memory, scowled, executed the hut's inhabitants, then crumpled up the tag and burned it. The boys didn't need to know who supported their enemy. He would carry that weight.

The days blurred together because there was no day and night. There was only rain and not rain. The rain came down in torrential nightmares, drowning out the world, washing away anything of worth in that godforsaken land. He was watching Corporal Smith sweep dirt in the middle of the rain. He had been guilty of insubordination. Of course, Smith had been right. He knew Smith was right because what Smith had said was what he had told the corporal to say. He had merely forgotten to say it himself. But that meant that the newbies, the ones that hadn't seen him tell Smith what to say two tours back, thought that Smith was usurping his authority. That couldn't be allowed to stand. So there he was, watching Smith sweep dirt that was really mud in the middle of a rainstorm, the roiling earth flowing up to his knees. With his head shirking from the sky's onslaught, and the peculiar shoulder shape caused by a minor wound a year ago exposed, Smith looked very small. Fragile, almost, like a porcelain doll laid helpless on the floor.

Captain Dalton (the boys were increasingly calling him the Cap) walked inside. He had wondered why the previous captain's orders were so simple. Now he knew that it was because high command never told them shit. He changed his orders, moving "Don't die" to the front of the list. Then he walked back out, taking in the humidity and the heat, and checked around. The little ones had gotten bored and stopped watching. He gave Smith a wave, and pointed him

inside. The Corporal stopped sweeping and went inside. His hair was slicked slippery with rain, a single rebellious blonde streak raging against the rigid order of the strawberry blonde strands all around it.

The golden hash marks on his right jacket sleeve were piling up.

He handled the business himself. No need for the grunts to have blood on their hands. Not that kind, anyways. They were rounded up based on probabilities and half-signs. More often than not, it was done simply to do something. It was impossible to burn down the whole jungle and tear the earth asunder. They were rounded up, these suspected Vietcong. Some were men, some were women, and some were children. It didn't matter. If they were Vietcong, they had to go. Bang, bang, bang, and a few more were released from Uncle Ho's employ. A few less people would be tuning into Hanoi Hannah that night. They would dig a shallow ditch and push them in, covering the bodies with a thin layer of dirt. Come rain, though, the waters would wash that dirt away, and they would reap a grim harvest of the rotting dead.

One day, they were out in the jungle when a curious thing occurred. A grenade tumbled to his feet. Now, he could've died there, but he didn't. He reached down, threw that puppy out, and dove to cover. It popped, spraying the air with metal fragments. He looked around for enemies, only for one of the men to be bumped out of the marching column. Fingers were being pointed at him. He looked weedy and scrawny, and his voice had a holier-than-thou pitch to it. His tone said "accident", but his eyes? His eyes burned with pure hatred. Dalton knew the type. They were showing up more and more now, what with the endless drive for bodies. Folks that sympathized with the motherfuckers out in the woods more than their fellow Americans. More and more, he was finding crates with American names on them. He was remembering too. In his quarters, he kept a list. Every time he spotted a Charlie, he put an American name to that face and blew it away. There would always be more Charlie, but it was cathartic.

As for the traitor? He experienced a long string of bad luck that eventually led to his death while on point. Dalton had a duty to his men, and he'd be damned if some bleeding heart turncoat would get them all killed to save some shit-eating peasants with hard-ons for killing American boys. But that traitor would be replaced. The enemy was winning hearts and minds.

It was off to the next mission. CAPs were scattered around the countryside, little clumps of marines embedded inside villages. They were there to get the civvies on the US side. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. They wouldn't be getting involved with them normally, but one of the natives had gotten information on some VC movement. One of the CAP villages was smack-dab in the path of a major Vietcong movement. If they didn't get reinforcements, they were goners. Hell, they were probably done for either way. It was a pointless gesture, but then again, what wasn't?

He saw it as they drew near. The bodies of the embedded marines were swinging in the wind. Around these grisly idols were scattered the heads of allied Vietnamese militiamen. The village had already fallen.

The village was a trap.

Everyone spread out, looking for cover, as the jungle came alive with gunfire. The enemy was actually running out at them! Their machine guns buzzed with angry hatred, spewing lead at the Vietcong. Dozens of them were coming. They were pouring out of the trees and the ground. A grenade fell over in one of his squads, sending steel fragments out in a massive circle of death. Mortar rounds were raining from the sky. Every wave they cut down was replaced by another two. They had to retreat, somehow. He took over a Pig and began to suppress the enemy. He pointed back along the path.

"Run, you goddamn idiots! I'll hold them off," said Dalton.

"Cap, what in God's green name do you think you're doing? You'll be torn to bits, there's too many of them!" shouted one of his men.

"Oh please, I've been in country long enough. You think they can take me so easy? Just run," replied the Captain.

Then the lieutenant nodded and tossed down some extra ammo. Others did the same. They turned around and made their retreat back into the jungle. The trucks sprayed fire into the trees as they slowly drove away.

Dalton held down the trigger and swiveled the machine on its bipod with one hand, and with another hand, he fumbled at his belt. His hands felt at the pouches, using the textures to guide his way. He had to keep his eye on the enemy. It was far too dangerous to look away. After an agonizing eternity, he found the correct strap, and popped it open. He brought the little device up to his mouth. He began to speak into it, the words traveling down the wire, up into the backpack, and through the air.

"M63, this is G20, do you read?"

"..."

"M63, this is G20, do you read?"

"..."

"YOU MOTHERFUCKERS! FUCKING ANSWER ME! M63, DO YOU READ?"

"This is M63 reading you loud and clear."

"This is G20, immediate suppression, shift known point 1, broken arrow! Authenticating Tango Foxtrot! Over!"

"..."

The guns began to ring. One of the soldiers took a deep breath. He loved the smell of fresh wolf pussy in the morning.

Off the shore, a ship was already in range. It decided to send a little gift as well.

The skies opened up with fire. Trees were pounded into splinters, and the air went thick with dust, smoke, and ash. Everywhere was screaming, but the screaming was pointless, for the noise was well and thoroughly swallowed up by the endless thudding of shells into the ground. They soared into the air, kissed the sky and saluted the sun, and fell down, always down, towards endless Charlie. Except for one. One was for him.

The whole world went white hot, then completely black. He felt himself floating in mid-air, weightless. It was cold, it was hot, it was everything and nothing. He peered into the abyss and saw the light. He peered into the abyss and saw himself. He saw the alpha and the omega and a single kiss from redheaded summer to blonde winter and the world turning upside-down and back again. He tried to touch the face of God but couldn't quite reach.

And then he was awake, and his whole body was cold as a corpse, and soaked wet. He was in the middle of a crater, and his uniform was charred, but damn it all, he was alive! There were shards of rapidly melting ice scattered around his feet, and the sky itself was red with sparks. The few trees and huts left standing were slathered with sticky fire. The jungle itself had been leveled, endless trees flattened into nothing. For the first time in forever, he could actually see the dead bodies of the Vietcong. There were Vietcong bodies. There were villager bodies. There were bodies of his men. There must have been hundreds of the dead, all equal now. There was the grisly temple, still standing upright even with the whole world brought low around it. And there was him. Him. Still alive. Still alive in the fire.

He was cold. So very cold.

"Dun dun dun doo dun doo doodly doo dun dun dun! Doo doo doo... doo doo doo... dun nah!" sang Anna as she slid along the wall, ending by shooting a finger gun at a hapless agent.

"Ahem! Your mission... if you choose to accept it... is to infiltrate and steal state protected chocolate making secrets in Switzerland! This Anna will self-destruct in anywhere between one second and eighty years," said Anna.

Agent Dokken nodded and walked away. Internally, he screamed *fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck* .

His next stop? The payroll department.

"Anita, you old hag, I need you to get a check ready for when I get back," said Dokken.

"Calm down. You'll get your money at the same time as everyone else," replied Anita as she checked a list.

"Well, lookee at Mrs. Important. I'll have you know that I'm risking my life out there doing some very cloak-and-dagger business, something a payroll jockey like you wouldn't know, and I expect to be rewarded for that! Is that so much to ask?"

"I shot a man once just to see him bleed. Mmm. It smelled good, like roses. This? This is my quiet retirement. They trust you with a job, and if you fail, they'll send more of you. I handle more money than you could possibly dream of. I do that because they trust me. But uhh... I've always been curious how your blood smelled, nancy boy."

"That got very creepy, didn't it! Someone is having a bit of a grumpy day."

"Just do your job."

Agent Dokken boarded a ship as an unlisted passenger. He arrived on the mainland, then took a train through Corona into France. From there, he crossed into Switzerland. He dropped his accent and adopted a new one.

He arrived on site. The factory was surrounded by a wall, but it was easy enough to grapple over it. The windows were on the second story. He climbed up and took out his glass cutter. It was nothing more than a slightly fancier steel knife. He oiled him the target circle and began to cut. The edges were rough and uneven, but the circle of glass came loose. Crude but effective. Like a cat, he dropped down from the ledge, silent but deadly.

God, he hated this job. It was always the same, really. No one to talk to either. He really wanted more people-related infiltration jobs, but that was for the Propaganda department and other members of his. He had terrible social skills. Whenever he talked to anyone other than his mum or nan, his palms would often get sweaty. Sweaty palms lead to hairy palms which lead to masturbation which leads to blindness or something. His nan's pieces of advice had gradually gotten less coherent over the years.

Someone spotted him! The jig was up.

Cold. Cold. So very cold. The chill ran right through his bones.

And things were different again. He was in the middle of a city, buildings blazing all around him. The air was thick with fear. Soldiers walked door to door, waving guns wildly. The sky wasn't crying. It refused to give the Americans the satisfaction. Napalm was smeared everywhere, a child's twisted art project made in fire and death. Women and children were running out of the city, running along the roads, praying the tar would take them somewhere, anywhere. Despite all this, more and more, he was finding the graffiti. Americans, don't go. Americans, please stay.

Don't leave us.

Don't leave us alone.

We don't want to be alone.

Where did I go wrong?

He tried to warm himself. The fire beside was burning bright, chipper and undaunted. Inside it, a woman's flesh charred and cracked open, the belly splitting open to reveal a half-formed fetus, before that too was consumed. The fire wasn't working. Dalton was still cold. So cold. Perhaps he should have ran from it. Ran from the city, ran from his duty. Run far enough, maybe you could escape. Escape from the cold, escape from what lay inside the heart.

He was running now. A woman had grabbed onto one of the skids and was hanging on for dear life. But she couldn't come with them. None of them could. Soon the North would roll in and begin its reprisals. Her hands began to slip, and she fell back to earth, hitting the ground. But within seconds, she was brushing herself off, reaching her hand out again, as the feet turned into yards and then miles, as if she could bridge the distance with will alone and bring back the troops. Her hand remained outstretched as the sun crept below the horizon.

Less than sixty thousand US soldiers had died. It was like fighting only one or two pitched battles. In comparison, the North had lost over a million soldiers. It was a kill/death ratio of 20:1. The Northerners were the scrappy underdogs here. Along with the few Americans kind, brave, and noble-hearted enough to defect and serve the Vietcong side, they had managed to humble the world's mightiest empire, and do it while undermanned and undersupplied. It hadn't been easy, but no act of heroism ever was. Now it was time for them to claim the hero's reward: a right to a reign of Terror.

Please don't go. We don't want to be alone.

The Americans had been an army of supermen. The Vietcong couldn't kill them, they couldn't even hurt them. So few had actually died out there, mere blips lost in the grand machinery of war. The Americans were invincible. Atop their helicopters, they could deploy faster than a speeding bullet. Airplanes could dispense American wrath anywhere. They could outfight any enemy, their soldiers were

mightier than ten men. It hadn't been enough. It couldn't have been. Not even a superman can drain the ocean or stop the tide. All the sex and murder of the southern regime was now foaming up around their wastes, and the whores and the politicians looked up at the helicopters and shouted "Save us!"

And Dalton? He could have said no. He could have said yes. But he knew neither of those answers held truth. He looked down at them and whispered "I can't."

The people watched as the supermen departed and the red tide washed over.

The truth hurts harder than any lie ever could. No one watches the watchmen because there are no watchmen. No one could ever bear the responsibility for guarding the world in its entirety. No one is ever willing to open their eyes to the unshielded truth because it is far too maddening to know. Everyone only takes a piece of it, a tiny personal sun, and is content. But out there, the truth lies, and it watches in judgment.

And then he had ran, but he wasn't home. He was covered in sweat, screaming. Screaming for mercy. Screaming for justice. Screaming because he just had to scream, couldn't do anything but scream. He had seen Jacobs strip naked and run out into the jungle. He had seen the old captain dead, and donned the mask. He had seen worthier men than he disappear into the tunnels forever. And there wasn't a point to any of it, because in the end, they, they the supermen had failed. He had been invincible, but he had never felt invincible. He had tried to hold up the world, and it had crushed him. And now he was crushing. He was hitting and fighting Charlie, but when he opened his eyes, it wasn't a Vietcong. It was a woman covered with bruises and raw cuts. His knuckles were bloody. He recoiled, fell back onto himself, and ran again. And as he looked back, he saw the woman pick a nametag up from off the ground and put it on.

Mary-Jane Greenbury.

He moved to Arizona. The miscegenation laws and race laws at the time of his birth in LA county meant that the drops of Chinese blood in him made him full Chinese. But there were ways around that. He looked white. He wanted to be white. Like all governments, a level of corruption existed in the United States, a somewhat benign tumor present in all organizations. He bribed county officials. He talked to one of the men he had met in 'Nam, a senator's son. The birth certificate changed, and then he used that to "fix" the national records. He was officially a white man.

He married, bought a home in the suburbs, and had two kids and a dog.

But late at night, he would wake up, beads of icy sweat covering his body, and he would try to wrap himself tight in the blankets. And it was then that he would curse against the bitter cold. For it bothered him.

The cold had always bothered him. It always would.

"Do you expect me to talk, Mr. Manager?" asked Dokken.

"No, Mr. Spy, I expect you to DIE!" shouted the manager as he brought the chocolate machine to life.

"Wait, if you throw me in there, you'll ruin the whole batch of chocolate! That takes a lot of time and money, you know."

"I do know, it's my job to know. Hmmmmmm. Alright, come on out, we'll just hand you over to the PROPER AUTHORITIES! AHAHAHAHA! And then you'll be HANGED! BWAHAHAHAHA!"

The two guards around the manager watched as Dokken returned to the walkway. Suddenly, he spun around and knocked the manager into the machine. The manager gurgled as the machine turned him into candy.

The guards raised their hands and dropped their weapons.

"Jesus, you just killed Michael! What the fuck?" asked the tall one.

"Ah man, he wanted to retire next year," said the short one.

"He was going to kill me!" protested Dokken.

"And apparently he was right to try, you just murdered him," replied the short one.

"Besides, death is supposed to be the punishment for espionage," said the tall one.

"Well, if you guys don't like it so much, why don't you try stopping me?" asked Dokken.

"You kidding me? You want to kill me too? Nope, I surrender," said the short one.

"Yup, I surrender too. I don't get paid enough for this," said the tall one.

"Some fat lot of good you did as guards! Sign up for this and don't expect to fight for your life? Ridiculous," said Dokken, as he tied the two up.

"Oh please. It's not like we're guarding some rare gem. It's secret... CHOCOLATE recipes. Who sends in professionals to steal chocolate secrets?" asked the short one.

"I just wanted a job where I could sit around all day reading my romance novels," said the tall one.

"What kind of a lunatic sends spies to a chocolate factory? I mean, really. Really?" said the short one.

"My employers do!" said Dokken. "Now where are the secrets?"

"How are we supposed to know? We're just guards," said the tall one.

"Probably in the office over there," said the short one.

"I can't just leave you two unwatched," said Dokken.

"Sure you can," said the short one.

Dokken thought to himself. Then he spotted a dolly. He loaded them onto it, then took them up to the office with him. He spotted a safe and started to crack it.

Anna tried the handle again, just to make sure. Yup, it was definitely locked.

"Elsa? Are we really doing this again? You know, Olaf taught how to pick locks," said Anna.

"Won't work, I frosted over the lock," replied Elsa.

Anna pulled out one of her revolvers and silently thanked Mr. Colt. In a flash, she riddled the lock with holes. Then she took a few steps back and rammed her shoulder into the door. With a shuddering crack, it fell apart, splintering into pieces. She brushed her hands together, pleased, but then spotted the next problem.

Her sister had put another door made of ice behind the first door. Really? Really? Whatever, it didn't matter very much. She had tools for this sort of thing. First, she drilled a tiny hole in the door. She checked the thickness of the ice. She made a few minor calculations, then poured out an appropriate amount of gunpowder. She lit the match and ran around the corner.

Boom! She came back, the ice now criss-crossed with fractures. With a grunt, she kicked the door to pieces. A flamethrower was now in her hand.

"You're really not going to leave me alone, huh?" asked Elsa.

"Nope, never," said Anna.

Elsa sighed.

"What's got into you lately?" asked Anna, as she surveyed the room, paying particularly close attention to all the inward facing spikes. "Oh no! Oh no! Are you... incontinent?"

"What? No, I'm not incontinent!" shouted Elsa.

"Well, I mean... you know... happens to a lot of people... I wouldn't judge... they have stuff for that... I just assumed... losing control again... spiking everywhere... hey, incontinence! Bowels. Boooooowellsss. BO-WEL. Wow, that sure is a funny word. Sounds pretty weird, huh? Boooooowweeeellllls. Bowel. Bowel. Bowel! Bowel? Boweeelllls. Bow-el."

"Anna, stop."

"Sorry."

"Take a look at these daguerreotypes."

"Oh wow. That guy sure is messed up. Look at all that crap."

"They're tumors! The man is covered head to toe in tumors! This never used to happen this much! There's rickets too. Did you know 4 out of 5 Arendelle children have rickets?"

"Oh, that's not so bad. That's just like London! Besides, it's funny to watch them walk. They're like little waddling ducklings. Mmmm, adorable."

"You're not helping! You see these charts? Heart disease is skyrocketing! Frozen heart... frozen heart! I'm freezing people's hearts! I'm giving them tumors! I'm killing everyone! Losing control, I

can't be losing control now! Powers will only grow... no, it's not... please..."

"Pfff, it's probably not you. It's probably the fact that the sky is green half the time."

"From the factories I built?"

"Oh, oh. No, it's probably not that either. I mean, smoke and soot make people happy! They're like cigars that you don't even have to smoke yourself! Mmmmm, great! It's probably... probably how FAT everyone is now. Yeah, because they're fat! Too much food and not enough manual labor nowadays. BUT NOT BECAUSE OF THE FACTORY JOBS! Because... we need... less chairs. Sitting is bad."

"Anna, I..."

Anna shoved a bottle of vodka into Elsa's mouth and started pouring.

"Arghh, pffkkk, uckk, smaargh, ooof," gurgled Elsa.

"Doesn't that feel better?" asked Anna.

"No, it doesn't at all!"

"It will once the happy buzz drowns out all the sad thoughts. Let's hug it all out now. Hey, ever heard the sound of one hand clapping?"

Anna clapped.

"That's not technically a clap," said Elsa.

"Shush, shhhhh... only alcohol now."

Still, Elsa had a point. What's worse, she most definitely was not directly behind the rise in cancer and heart disease. She, and others, were now uncovering the cruel Sisyphean nature of the fight against disease. She had pushed the rock up so far, only to find new threats waiting to throw it back down. As it rolled back, it crushed her.

Having slain the monstrous diseases of poverty, the good knight finds they have only delivered their wards into the hands of the diseases of wealth. As typhoid, tuberculosis, fevers, flus, cholera, diarrhea, pneumonia, smallpox, and other such diseases went into wane in the late-19th and early to mid 20th century, these new lords of the earth would take their places on carrion thrones.

"I hate this job," said the short one.

"I hate my job too," said Dokken.

"Why would you hate your job?" asked the tall one.

"Because it's shit! Those fancy guys get to go around, hobnobbing with actors and actresses, shmoozing with writers and musicians, spreading disinformation and fucking pretty woman, charming the pants off everyone, and I'm here breaking into a chocolate factory. Breaking. Into. A. Chocolate. Factory," said Dokken.

"Well, it doesn't sound so bad..." said the tall one.

"Oh, you'd think! Well, I like to dress a little nice. I like to feel classy, feel a little dapper, you know? But I couldn't anymore. When you kill someone, they shit themselves, and boy, the smell goes everywhere! It took me ages to clean up after each time. So I just started wearing this shitty little shirt/pants combo. And hell, when you have to clean up the body? Huge pain in the ass, gotta get all the blood out, stuff sticks in everything, and nobody ever thanks you. No one says, 'Gee, thanks for cleaning up that body so well.' No, it's 'AAAAHHH OUR BEST FRIEND IS DEAD.' Well, doesn't that just make me feel like chopped liver."

"That's rough."

"Yeah, and me mum and nan don't help. It's always on and on about the grandchildren. It's not easy to meet girls like this. She asks me what I do for a living, I just mumble something about secrets and we

stare at each other awkwardly. It's terrible, real terrible. Then I go home and I have to get judged by them."

"You live with your mother?"

"Hey, I love me mum. Don't you? Anyways, they're always pestering to find a real job too, quit these little spy games. Well, mum, this is a real job! It's very real!"

"My parents don't think much of my guard job either."

"Yeah..."

"Yeah..."

The safe popped open, revealing a massive stack of paper. Dokken groaned and began to sift through to find the relevant documents.

"Ugh, and the hours, the hours are the worst. Zero dark thirty? Really? You expect me to get up then? It's hell on my sleep schedule."

"You're telling me! I'm here on a Saturday! I ought to be laying in bed eating cheese."

"I hear you, I hear you. Do you ever wonder what the point is?"

"Sometimes, why?"

"I mean... I used to think that God was really loving, but then I've seen too much to know that's true. You know what I saw? There are men with normal dicks, men with huge dicks, and men with really really tiny dicks! And I thought... if God loved us so much, why would some men have such small dicks? Wouldn't He want to give us all large or at least average dicks? You know, that's the sort of thing that can really shake your faith in Him. I just... can't believe in a loving God that would give some men such small dicks."

He found all of the relevant documents. Smuggled out chocolate technicians and experts waiting back in Arendelle would make good use of these. He saluted the two guards.

"I'm off, gentlemen. I'll see you all... never," said Dokken.

Dokken fled the scene.

"He seemed nice," said the tall one.

"Yeah, pretty alright dude," said the short one.

"Wait... a minute."

"We're still tied up. Crap!"

"He killed Mike! He killed Mike!"

"Jeez, when's the next shift change?"

"Six more hours..."

"This rope is riding up my ass crack."

"I did not need to know that."

An added benefit of the crystal-uranium reaction over the standard nuclear one was the vastly reduced uranium requirement. Following the war, the Rosenbergs would smuggle crystal secrets to the USSR before their execution. At the height of the Cold War, the US had 35,000 nuclear bombs, and the USSR 42,000, compared to the next largest nuclear power with only 400.

In 1971, the Toronto Accident buried nuclear power in the West. The exact causes are still unknown, but a plant on the outskirts of Toronto suffered a catastrophic and complete meltdown. The crystal-plutonium core overloaded, and exploded. The entire power plant was disintegrated. A wave of energy shot out, reaching the edgemost

areas of the city. 30,000 people froze into crystals, and from their expressions, it had been extraordinarily painful. In the affected areas, there was a 99.7% death rate. Radiation spread throughout North America. The outrage was spectacular. Needless to say, anyone even remotely involved lost their jobs and went into permanent political exile or worse. It couldn't bring back the dead.

Meanwhile, cancer research was running into obstacles. Far from being one disease with one cure, cancer was turning out to be a hundred-headed hydra. One cure might be able to slay and cauterize one head, but for every head defeated, there were a multitude more. There was no magic bullet, and the public was rapidly losing enthusiasm for the grisly affair of half-cures and dangerously risky solutions. More generations would pass.

In the late 2010s, crystal researched finally resumed, as the tragedy in Toronto slowly faded out of living memory. Radiation treatments had been somewhat successful, and the crystal was brought up as a possible alternative. As they dug through old records, they found some startling facts. All of those who had survived the Toronto blast, even the most elderly, were still alive and well. Then, one day, as a doctor chatted with another university professor, this one from the Computer Science department, an interesting observation was made.

That crystal wasn't just a power source. It was a naturally occurring quantum computer.

It was practically a holy grail of computing. Scores of problems could suddenly be simplified to linear or polynomial time.

Information is power. A radical new plan was hatched. Oncologists, physicists, nanoengineers, computer scientists, biologists, epidemiologists, chemists, electrical engineers, and scores more gathered together, one of the largest interdisciplinary projects ever performed. After a series of setbacks and attempted legislation against it, the trial run was moved to Corona. The subject? An old Korean lady with a very dedicated physician daughter with deep

pockets, a woman pushing her late eighties, with cancer metastasizing throughout her body. It was incurable by normal means.

Flower, gleam and glow

Let your power shine

The power demands were massive. The energy required to run computations through the crystals was so great that they resurrected old crystal reactor technology and built several of their own private reactors to power the device. It was absolutely necessary that the crystals not be observed until the information was fully processed, otherwise the q bits would collapse back into regular bits. The woman was scanned, and information was gathered and used on every single cell in her body, 37 trillion cells with megabytes of data for each one, amounting to petabytes of information being acquired and processed. This information was used to recognize cancer and make highly specific purges.

Make the clock reverse Bring back what once was mine

They asked her how it felt. She seemed to be fine.

Two of the scientists, both in Romanian, decided to have a chat in their native tongue, a low whispering chat, not meant to be heard by anyone else. The patient managed to hear and respond in perfect Romanian. She had never been taught it. Indeed, she had never even met Romanians or been to Romania before.

Heal what has been hurt Change the Fates' design

They had intended to make her less. To remove something from her, albeit something incredibly toxic and harmful. Instead, she had become something much more. More than human.

Save what has been lost Bring back what once was mine

Soon enough, they found that she had become fertile again. That old granny would live for another thirty-two years.

And then, as word spread, the iron laws of capitalism went into effect. Make the shittiest product that still works, sell as much of it as possible, and minimize costs. As is often the case, greed would usurp charity and good will in propagating goodness, following in the perversely noble predictions of Adam Smith. Costs fell through the floor, as companies surged in to exploit this new "cure for cancer". In truth, it was not yet so. There were a great multitude of cancers that still needed new data. But with money came manpower, and the new computing tools allowed for mass data collection on an unheard of level. NSA data sorting techniques were released to the NCI and used to make sense of everything. Prices went from tens of millions to mere several hundreds of thousands. The nuclear fire that had destroyed Berlin was now destroying death itself, much like how mustard gas had been studied to eventually develop chemotherapy. One by one, cancers were checked off the list. The study of the unhealthy body led to great advances in the understanding of the healthy body, and soon mass-produced organs made heart disease and other maladies a thing of the past. As theoretical physics became practical physics, the field made leaps and bounds, as hypothesis could be quickly and easily tested.

If one looks at only a certain portion of an exponential graph, that little bit can easily appear somewhat linear. By the late 21st century, life expectancy had finally escaped that doldrum. Gains in lifespan began to massively outstrip the time it took to live that gain. At long last, an ancient dream was coming true.

That is not dead which can eternal lie.

And with strange aeons even death may die.

In the previous century, they had been words of fear. But now, they became an anthem of hope. Humanity, through this strange gift from the deep, had finally achieved immortality. Death had died. Oppenheimer had become death, but he was not the death of man.

In that crystalline legacy, he had become a fragment of the death of death itself, one of millions that would contribute and eventually bring an end to disease.

And that sallow emperor was laid low. No empire lasts forever.

New Imperialism

"Her ass is pretty nice, isn't it? I see you looking."

These were the words that started the Victorian Era.

What a fitting start it was. The ceremony had bordered on the ludicrous. It was incredibly elaborate, and yet most of the participants had failed to do any sort of meaningful practice. The music was a rehash of the last coronation's, and people fumbled and tripped over themselves. One of the rare and exotic gifts sent, a monkey, broke free of its cage. Virtually none of the populace had seen one before. They crowded around, only to panic and start rioting in fear when it began to screech, howl, and hurl its own feces. It was quite literally a shitstorm. This would be the first real test of the newly founded London City Police. It was really a very novel idea. Police that weren't secret, military, or unprofessional rabble? Ingenious. Needless to say, they failed this test miserably. It is all too easy to underestimate the strength of a monkey, as their appearance belies the true power of that wiry muscle. The creature's reign of terror was only put at an end when a local fruit vendor shoved their cart into it, at which point the monkey gorged itself and fell asleep.

Of course, by this time, the actual coronation was in full swing. The crown touched Victoria's head.

And Princess Anna Hohenzollern, Duchess Ostlandet, Marshal of the French Empire, bearer of the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross, bearer of the Pour le Merite, Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor, Knight of the Order of Saint Magnus the Martyr, Knight of the Order of the Black Eagle, Knight of the Military Order of Saint Henry, Viceroy of Iceland, leaned towards her sister's ear and spoke those fateful words, whispers against the stoic silence.

No one else heard, nor would they have understood. After all, they were speaking Norwegian.

Later that evening, they were walking the streets of London, when Elsa started to hum. She realized her mistake almost immediately, and quit. Unfortunately, Anna's body had already caught the tune.

Elsa tried to stop her, but Anna was already bobbing to an invisible beat.

"Anna! Anna, what are you doing? Where's that music coming from? Oh my god there's so many animals where are these animals coming from? This is London, there's not supposed to be woodland creatures here!" shouted Elsa.

"Her legs are wide open, so's that whore, I didn't know they did that out of Bangalore, who knew you could use a sword to mastuuuuur-bate!" sang Anna.

Little songbirds were draping a mantle of spikes around Anna's shoulders. Elsa's jaw dropped further and further.

"There are children around, please think of the children!" protested Elsa.

"For years you've not sucked on fresh balls, why not a manwhore to deck your halls, finally we'll open up your gates!"

"These are actual real live people. You've convincing them we're strange."

"Wow, you think I care if I'm deranged?"

"For the first time in forever, there's thugs watching from the right."

"Well, for the first time in forever, I could kill men in a fight!"

"You did that last year!"

"Nuh uh, two years ago!"

Squirrels were now scampering around, and a baby deer was fastening a death cape to Anna's back.

"Anna! Please stop this song, they look irate. Just go to the bar and drink until it's late."

"But, but-"

"I don't need sex, just leave me be. Yes, I'm alone, but I don't have VDs. Just stop this song and we'll go taste some cheese."

"But Victoria's so hot!"

"What do you mean she's hot?"

"I saw you checking out her robes."

"I was not checking out her robes!"

"When you blush it really really shooooowsss."

"What?! I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'd be willing to ship you with everyone."

"Everyone?"

"It's totally okay, you're the Queen! You can do whatever you want!"

"No, I can't! I have duties! A public image!"

"Sure you can! I do it cuz I can!"

Elsa looked deep into Anna's eyes, and asked a very important question.

"Why are you still wearing that gas mask?"

"The air's about the same here as it is back home."

"But we're in public."

"It's stylish! Check me out!"

Ducklings were quacking excitedly as they polished the little metal skulls and war medals on Anna's outfit.

"Cuz for the first time in forever..." "I'm such a fool, thought I was free!"

"I make them properly afraid!" "No escape from the songs on top this street!"

"We'll seduce the Queen together!" "Where are all these urchins coming from?"

"We'll even get her maids!" "Someone help! There are too many orphans here!"

"Don't panic-" "I read Oliver Twist! Stop singing! I hated Oliver Twist, get away from me!"

"I know how to give them fright-" "Anna, please put that gun down!"

"I can make them into leather!" "Ah, ah, stop, okay you're scared, don't wet yourselves."

"And everything is now alright." "Do you know how hard it is to clean this dress? I'm covered in orphan piss."

Anna picked up a duckling. It looked at her happily. Anna grinned.

"Don't you just love all these adorable animals?" asked Anna.

"Not really," said Elsa.

"Did you know ducks have explosively strong corkscrew penises?"

"I didn't, and I didn't need to know that. I'm going to go throw up in an alley."

Elsa doubled over and puked onto one of the nearby orphans. He started crying.

"Okay, so change of... hurk... plans. Not alley, right here," said Elsa.

"Are you okay?" asked Anna.

"Fuck... Dickens... fuck him," said Elsa.

The odd looks come fast and furious. They have to when you're a forty-year old man working the register at the Golden Arches. Still, I couldn't go back. Better menial work than pointless work. One rots the mind, but the other rots the soul.

I poured myself a glass of brandy and tuned the TV to *Game of Thrones* .

It had been a clear and sunny morning as I stepped off the train to Hotan in Xinjiang. My interpreter and guide was waiting at the station for me. His name was Lu Fanming. I spoke a smattering of Mandarin, but it was hardly sufficient to the task. I took a deep breath. It was time to get to work. These protests wouldn't cover themselves.

"Mr. Weinburg?" asked Fanming.

"Yes, that's me," I replied.

"Turn back now. It's not safe here," said Lu.

"What are you talking about? I know it's not the safest place, but I'm a reporter."

"The protests have gotten worse since last we spoke. The city is a warzone now. The government is planning to send in the tanks soon."

Turn back now."

"All the more newsworthy then. Let's get to it."

We made our way into the city by truck. As we came closer to downtown, we came to a roadblock. In retrospect, that should have been the straw. That should have been the breaking point. After all, my own guide had warned me. But who was I? A chaser of stories, a magpie ever yearning for the next big thing. A wanderer drawn to the lodestone rock.

They stopped us and began to pat us down. Suddenly, one of them began to shout angrily. It was chilling reminder that my so-called Chinese was useless here. A thousand languages masquerading as dialects of one tongue, a living embodiment of Beijing's desire for centralization, and, for now, me the unwitting victim. I put my hands in the air and waited. They were about to wave us through, when behind me, I heard commotion. Then one of them ran up to the leader, something clutched in his hand. They began their mad babbling again, and I wondered what was the matter. I did not have to wait long before they forced me onto my knees and pressed a gun to my forehead. For a moment I thought it was a FAMAS, but as I looked closer, I realized my error and identified it as an AK-74. Troubling. After all, the Chinese military used the QBZ-75, a variant of the AR-10 licensed to them by ArmaLite and modified by their own private firms. The AK was a Soviet gun.

As a sack was placed over my head, I was grimly aware that I was no longer in Kansas.

"So how's that coffee?"

The voice came from the tent entrance, but I was still looking at my maps. I turned my head backwards to look. It was my Emperor's aunt and...

"Ma'am, there's some sort of insect crawling up your hand!" I shouted.

"Huh? Oh, no, no, no. This is a fruit. It's a 'ba-nah-ner'," said Anna.

"A bananer? I don't trust it."

"They're delicious! I like Africa, except for the pills and the long walks and the angry natives and the rest of the food and the dirt and the swamps and the pills again because I don't like having to eat medicine all the time if I don't want to die a horrific death. It really sucks. I know it's not the kind of thing that would seem that bad, but it kind of is."

"I see."

"So... you know why I'm here, right?"

I stared blankly at her.

"I am well aware."

"It's not a slight against you... yet. My nephew is a smart man, and he put his trust in you for a reason."

"The men refuse to fight as hard as they should. They find it... disgraceful... to shoot at women."

"I realize that it is a difficult position. Nevertheless, I have an envelope authorizing me to come out of retirement and take command of the army if the campaign continues to go poorly. With the Arendelle monarchy now effectively abolished, I have a lot of free time on my hands. Time for hobbies, you know? But uhhhh... yeah. That won't be necessary."

"It won't be. The kingdom will be ours."

"Good attitude, general. Good attitude. Try to instill it in your men."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Take this bananer, it's tasty. Fresh fruit's too hard to come by sometimes."

I nodded. She left. I took another sip of coffee, but some spilled out. It splashed onto my skin, burning it. I watched the little droplets roll down my skin, brown against brown. The map would be stained.

The map would be stained.

"You can't keep pushing yourself like this," said the Queen.

"I have to. I have to. I have a duty to her. I have to make up for lost time," replied the King.

"You're going to kill yourself!"

"Does it really matter? I'm already dying. I might as well make the most of what I have."

"Thomas-"

"THOMAS IS DEAD! I killed him! There is no Thomas now. Thomas was a philander, a heretical mystic, a half-wit and scoundrel. He is dead, and good riddance. Frederick William is a king, a mourning father, a gentle hand, and the man the Coronan people deserve. Do not call me Thomas."

"I met you as Thomas."

"But I only loved you as Frederick William. Why do you insist on raising the damned? My darling little primrose, my sweet wife, please, leave it be."

"You can't run from yourself forever. You're killing yourself."

"Good."

And the King walked out to meet his loving daughter. He worked 18-hour days as a rule now, if continuous father-daughter interaction could be called work. The creeping death moved along him, spreading in vicious circles through the body. The viscous blackness of it was poisoning him. It didn't matter. Frederick William would chase Thomas into his grave and bury him forever.

As he stepped out onto the lawn, he muttered quietly to himself.

"I will die a good christian and father. Thomas... Thomas, he is dead."

The rattling of the truck was insatiable, and the noise put a vice grip around my mind. The thrumming of the engine called me to sleep, but I could not. The rattle, it possessed me. The rattle was a force to keep me awake, to lock me in my burlap Purgatory. The air inside my bag was thick and stagnant, and I had to gulp deeply just to breath. The rattle was trying to choke me, and it was succeeding.

There was yelling outside. I felt the rocking of the truck beneath me. I felt the heat of my own breath beating back on me. My body tumbled back and forth, battering me and bruising me. The bag came loose and fell to the ground. I looked but didn't see. The doors of the truck were open, and bright sunlight pierced my eyes, stinging them.

There was a moment of peace before the cacophony of the crowd washed over me. The truck had been surrounded by a massive brawl. The chaos made it impossible to distinguish sides. It was just heat and sweat and thickness, bodies hurled against bodies in an unholy gyration. My hands were still bound, but I ran, trying to push my way through the pulsing throng. But they were pressed too thick, and every time I thought I had made progress, I found that I had only circled back to the center. But as I was finally resigning myself to stay in this mob until it had run its course, I felt a hand tug on my vest. Her black bangs framed a careworn face rapidly draining of youth, but those blue eyes were piercing. An AR-15 was slung on her back.

I felt her grip tighten, and she led me out of the crowd. And the fates judged and I knew not what they intended.

Every time, he found himself drawn to the stump, and he hated himself for it. Worthless, superficial. Just like the city folk he had once judged. Anna was tossing and turning. He gently kissed her on the cheek and stroked her skin. Anna mumbled and pawed at some invisible specter. Her eyes fluttered open, and she greeted her husband with a kiss.

"I'm worried," said Anna, before she yawned.

"You scared them," replied Kristoff.

"They'll have to learn sooner or later. Facts of life and..."

Anna's voice trailed off.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be this way," said Kristoff.

"It does. No, I know it does. People don't do anything without motivation. Be the monster they fear, or else they'll grow complacent. Elsa never could be that monster. She's... she's too good for this world. I'll do it, but one day I'll be gone. They need to learn... need to learn sooner or later."

"Anna, I'm worried too."

"We've got a busy day tomorrow, and sleepyheads don't stay alert. We're deep in the bush now."

"Anna, I-"

"Gotta get some good rest. Mmmmm, sleeps!"

"Anna. I love you. I'll always be here for you, you know that right?"

"I... I know. I really wish I could do the same. I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry."

"Don't be, you have nothing to be sorry over. I was butting in somewhere I shouldn't be anyways. You know more about this than I do."

"I... I came back wrong, didn't I?"

"No. Never think that."

"I'll make it up to you. Tomorrow night? The wolf is going to circle the Reindeer King's camp. It hungers!"

"Yeah. Good night."

"Sweet dreams."

And yet, he could not but stare at the stump and the web of scars along her back before sleep took him again. Years apart and miles above, a Soviet star ascended to the gold-speckled sky. As it sang its delicate and gentle music, the great masses looked up in fear. There it was, a monster in the sky.

Since time immemorial, the Sami had lived their traditional lives in a manner most suited to them. But the winds of change never leave survivors. As Arendelle forced its way into modernity, it dragged the Sami along with it. With the rise of nationalism, a separate Sami identity was judged to be a threat. Separatist movements would threaten Arendelle's integrity. Official efforts to suppress the Sami identity began in the early 1840s, but went into full swing by the late 19th century. Sami dress was banned. Speaking anything other than the newly adopted Arendelle standard dialect was heavily stigmatized. Native customs and culture were outlawed. The recalcitrant were forced into official assimilation and reeducation camps, and children were taken away to be schooled in special facilities.

Those Sami dwelling in Sweden or those that had managed to flee across the border thought they were the lucky ones. How wrong they were. In the early 20th century, Sweden began a campaign of forced sterilization against its Sami minority. Arendelle was outraged. After all, one of the branches of its royal family held significant Sami blood. The royal family began to fund efforts to bring Sami across the border. Given the choice between cultural genocide and literal genocide, most would choose the former. The Swedish were furious. This was a clear undermining of their sovereignty. Anna Hohenzollern's granddaughter Marie Victoria made an impassioned speech to the Reichstag, calling the Sami affair one of the great monstrosities of the era. History, she claimed, would judge Sweden for its attempted destruction of an entire people. She was wrong. Outside of their little corner of the world, it would never gain notice. Thus, the Arendelle monarchy petitioned its masters in Corona. Though the Kaiser was stretching his resources thin, and doing so would weaken the right wing of his army, he moved 12,000 troops to Arendelle to guard the border. Schlieffen was furious and soon developed ulcers, which rapidly worsened and killed him, just as the war was upon Corona. Suddenly the Coronan military was headless.

The first World War should have been a continental affair. But Britain, eager to enter the action, used the undermining of Swedish sovereignty as a *casus belli*. British troops soon reinforced their French comrades, and the world was set alight. With the British engaged, it would only be a matter of time before their cultural kin and allies across the pond would join them. Civilian ships loaded with uncivilian goods crossed the Atlantic to-and-fro, each a ticking time bomb. Strike them, and the Americans would mourn the loss of civilian life. Strike not, and the foe resupplies further and further.

The end of the monarchy and the rise of communism would not improve the Sami lot. It was no longer specifically targeted at them, but the communist yoke was harsh and grueling. Long hours and meager reward was the order of the day, and seldom was there any reprieve. Their customs, already reduced to superficial gestures at most, were attacked further. "Many Ethnicities, one Norwegian

Socialist Republic, One People" was the official creed, and deviation was not advised. As Mao drew closer to death, he had his most loyal men begin the Cultural Revolution. Everything had to go, as the old ways were the trappings of a fundamentally flawed capitalist culture. Names were changed. Any name not completely Norwegian was forcibly altered. The Arendellan culture barely survived, a few threads and strings attempting to masquerade as cloth. The Sami one, already stretched thin, broke. Communism would take a heavy toll.

It would take ten years of research to piece together enough material for even the minor portrayal given in *Frozen*. Ironically, this effort would be most successful in Sweden, as the Cultural Revolution had not touched their doorsteps. Although the Sami numbers there were greatly diminished, they had retained their identity. In the end, however, another tribe was absorbed, much like many others, dissolved into a quilt of states, a world that no longer had a place for tribes and old customs.

I checked the reports again. Not enough grain. Really, these primitives couldn't do anything right. I looked at the framed picture of the supervisor on my wall. Truly a marvelous man, the torch of civilization in these wasted lands. With a smile, I dropped the grains of quinine into my tea and drank deeply.

I would have to go on a trip. They had to be hiding the grain somewhere. Really, it was impossible to get such low yields. That's what we were here for, after all. Humanitarian aid, humanitarian reasons. Our yields? Our yields were better. Our tools were better. They would have to be half-witted to get such low yields. All these little people, these little people of color scurrying around the world and their little problems. Thousands of years, and they could not hold a single candle to English accomplishment. But that's what we were there for. We could mount the offense for them. We could lift them up. We knew their problems, and we would fight them. It was only just.

The tooting of the steam whistle beckoned. The boat was here, ready to sail up the snakey, twisting river and head into the African interior. I began to whistle a jaunty tune. The air was pleasant today, a rare occurrence in this malarial land. Everything about the continent was poison. But the soul? The soul succumbs to no mortal ills. I was an Englishman, and true Englishmen could go through worse.

I boarded the steamer. It was time to take up the White Man's Burden.

His chest heaved unsteadily. The Queen held her breath, as if taking it could steal the air from her husband's lungs. The blood-red paint slowly dried. The physician checked the steady drip of liquid, stirring it a bit to see the viscosity. No good.

"My Queen, there is nothing more to be done," said the Doctor.

"Ten thousand thalers," replied the Queen.

"He is far beyo-"

"I claim the right to rule as regent while my husband is incapacitated. I have the authority to do this."

"That may be bu-"

"Twenty thousand thalers."

"My la-"

"Fifty thousand thalers."

"You're not lis-"

"A hundred thousand thalers! A knighthood! Make it happen."

"The tumors are already everything! No mortal hand can stop this now. All that remains is to make peace with God."

The Queen spat in the Doctor's face.

"Then what good are you? What good are you?" she screamed, as she began to sob. "You son of a whore. You stupid son of a whore. Why Thomas, why? THOMAS! YOU WORTHLESS MAN! God in heaven, Thomas!"

Exit Thomas, stage left, pursued by Frederick William II.

As we passed through the city, I saw the hotel where I had booked a suite. The windows were boarded up and the lobby was strewn with broken furniture and scraps of paper. Streetlights had been torn down, and wires sparked rebelliously, the treacherous cobras of a modern age, serpents that would not brook any approach. Cracked red residue was splashed on walls here and there, and these little bits of abstract art were ringed by waiting crowds of admiring flies.

I cringed. It was somewhat upsetting, after all.

She spoke a Hui dialect, and I spoke English as my native tongue, so we met in the middle and had a nice compromise. Mandarin, that would be the order of the day. Her house was small, but cozy. She prepared a rice porridge for me and began to explain things.. Apparently some of the Hui minority had decided to take things into their own hands when protests failed. One thing had led to another in quick succession.

"I don't need this separatism business," she had said. "I just want peace and safety for my family."

Outside, I heard trash cans burning merrily and the blaring of car alarms as their windshields shattered. I nodded. Her husband had squinting eyes and a dark cast to his complexion, and lines creased his forehead. He played the viola in a local orchestra but the concert

hall had been burned down. And her child? I looked him. He raised his tiny hand and pressed it against mine, and I felt the gentle flutter of a fragile heartbeat.

I had nowhere to go. She offered me a place to stay. I accepted.

Esau looked at Saidi. Her cheeks were already starting to lose their fullness, and her eyes were bloodshot. From the other room, their newborn was wailing. He sighed deeply and looked at the hardened mud walls again. Nothing to be done now, nothing to be done. It was starting to rain outside. He gritted his teeth. The earth had cracked and fractured, parched by endless drought. Now it was raining. Now it was raining.

"What are we going to do?" asked Saidi.

"What can we do?" replied Esau.

"He'll be coming soon."

"Yes, he will be."

"Can we lie to him? Hide something?"

The knocking answered their question. Esau went to check.

The overseer was there, smile plastered on his leering face.

"Good afternoon, sir. How are you doing? A bit under the weather?"

"Good one, sir."

"Sir? Oh, there's no need to be so formal. I'm your friend here. Please, call me Jacob."

"What is the matter, Mr. Jacob?"

"It's just the oddest thing, you know? Your quota seems to be... a little short. And I was just wondering why that was. I figured something got misplaced."

"The harvests were bad, Mr. Jacob."

"Oh, pish posh. That's what our stock is for. That's what our seeds are for. We can fix those problems."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jacob, the harvests were still poor."

"Well, everyone makes mistakes. Still, I think you can part with a little more."

"I need this food, Mr. Jacob. We're very low on supplies as is."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll manage! You're a smart fellow. Industrious, ingenious. You can part with just this last bit, this teeny-weenie bit."

"I really can't. Please."

"Where I come from, frugality is a virtue. You should talk to my mother about stretching things out. A Sussex housewife could give whole volumes on the subject, bless their hearts. If you want, I can give tips. I am an expert."

"I see."

"I'll just be taking my share now."

Esau stared.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. This is quite a sorry bit of ingratitude, quite a sorry bit indeed. Do you not realize how privileged you are? Yes, privileged! And privilege that is taken for granted is a dangerous thing indeed. You know, farmers back home wouldn't get this sort of treatment. Free seeds, free tools, and all we ask for is proper work given and some of the yields paid back. Really, it's practically charity."

"I'm sorry... sir."

"Yes, yes, I accept your apology. Just realize how lucky you are, how lucky you are. You've been given something extraordinary. Don't think of it as failing me, think of it as failing yourself. I'll be off now."

The overseer stirred a few quinine grains into his coffee and drank deeply. The rain continued to pour down.

The Dahomey had assembled on the opposite ridge. Anna looked coldly upon their positions. The ranks were disciplined, but they lacked heavy weaponry. It would be a fatal mistake for them.

The general had his excuses. Yes, the enemy was trained. Yes, they had modern guns. Yes, they even had a state and not some pitiful and crude tribal council. But nobody would see that. Nobody would understand if France lost the campaign. A great power losing to a bunch of tribals, and women at that? France would become a laughingstock. Excuses, even if true, were still just excuses. Only victory mattered.

Someone once asked how she had lived so long. Her answer was simple.

"You live to my age by not dying."

And those defiant foes, they still sat there on that ridge. Danish guns. Danish training. She spat in the dirt. Today would prove it all to be worthless. French valor would carry this day, and their lines would undoubtedly break as easily as spines. As her thoughts changed track again, she thought of Leipzig.

The general was no doubt on his way. The irrelevant noises faded out of her mind. She waited. The crunching of footsteps. She turned around, raised an eyebrow. He was slowly climbing up. The battlefield was laid out below the hill, like a wargame or board full of

miniatures. The general's eyes were cast downwards, and his hands were clenched.

"General?" asked Anna.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are your forces ready?"

"They are."

"You feel sympathy for them."

"..."

"I can see it in your eyes."

"I do."

"Why?"

"..."

"I asked you a question, general. It's rude to keep a lady waiting."

"How could I not?"

"They're not of your kind."

"I know that. My mind and soul scream at my body, but my body still remains stubborn."

"What do you have in common? Skin color?"

"They look like me, yes."

"Skin color doesn't matter. In the end, all races die alike. You don't know their culture, their customs, their struggles."

"No, I don't."

"You speak French, drink French wines, eat French foods, read French, lead French. You are a Frenchman. Even the ground and air here poisons you. How can you belong to this... place... when it kills you just as much as it kills me? Without modern medicine, we'd already be goners."

"Yes. Yes."

"You're French. Never let there be a doubt in your mind."

"I am French."

"Are you ready to begin the assault?"

"The cavalry have already been dispatched. They wheel around at this very moment. Our infantry will begin their advance in fifteen minutes."

"Good."

"These weapons... must we use them?"

"Victory at any cost. Any weapon will be used so long as it leads to victory. If we didn't have these, and they did, you can bet they would deploy them."

And the general walked off. The French would be pushed back no more.

I met Uncle Zhou today. He came in just after I gave the family a contact card. He was Mrs. Jian's brother, and his face could have belonged to your run-of-the-mill Han. He drank rice wine almost to excess, and he had this habit of chewing on his pens. His gut was quite prodigious, and it jiggled to-and-fro when he laughed. Most relevant to me, though, was his fluent English. For the first time since

I entered Xinjiang, a time span that seemed to now approach forever, I could have a real conversation.

What a curious thing conversation is. Many of the ancients believed in the power of words. In a way, I suppose we still do. The pen and the sword, after all. Maybe that's what drew me to journalism. Every year makes it harder to remember why, but maybe that was why. After all, what is a word? What are words? They carry ideas. Ideas, beliefs held within the heart. In a way, words are pieces of souls. Every word, a little fragment of being carried by the wind. To say something is to make it realer, somehow. To say something is to make yourself a little more real as well. A man who never spoke or wrote to another... how could such a man ever be sure they were alive and not some ghost still bound to this mortal plane? And when they perish, what will be left? Only bones, and those bones only briefly, before all becomes dust. Words carry fragments of our souls, and they linger far after our own deaths. In a way, they are tiny phylacteries, mankind's one and only true claim to immortality.

I opened my mouth and checked that I was still real.

"So... you must be Mr. Zhou," I said.

"That I am, pleased to meet you! What's your name? Ah, don't tell me. That nose, those rosy cheeks, that style of jacket, the way the mud cakes your left shoe... hmmm... the callous pattern on your right hand. The way you frown and smile. You must be Mr. Weinburg, you must hail from New England, but are probably originally from the Midwest, and your occupation is journalism," said Mr. Zhou.

My jaw dropped.

"How did you figure all of that out?" I asked.

"Your press badge is showing."

"So what brings you here?" asked Mr. Zhou.

"I was originally here to cover the Xinjiang protests."

"Ah. Bet you got a little more than you bargained for, eh?"

"Yeah, a bit."

"Well, at least it's exciting! Ha!"

"What do they want?"

"It's a revolution, Mr. Weinburg, a revolution. Nobody really knows. Oh, they might say they know... but they don't. Things are funny that way."

"I see?"

"Got a gun, Mr. Weinburg?"

"No, I never could get into it."

"Oh, you should. Journalism is a dangerous line of work, you know? Way too dangerous not to be safe."

"Do you have a gun?"

"Yup, wouldn't go anywhere without it."

"What is it? A Desert Eagle, a-"

"A Deagle? A Deagle brand Deagle? Jesus, if you wanted to give me a piece of overhyped garbage, sure. Too big, wasted power, overdesigned like all American crap. Jams like my toast and it's as heavy as a long gun. Can't even hit the broad side of a barn. It's got brand value, but what else does it have? You'd have to be an idiot to use it, Mr. Weinburg."

"What do you even do anyways?"

"Odds and ends, odds and ends."

He took out a cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. To my surprise, there was no smoke.

"Marvelous little invention they have here. Quite new, but I expect it'll spread. You can't keep a good idea down, no siree. Electronic cigarette. All of the habit, none of the pain," said Mr. Zhou.

He grinned toothily.

I knew they were hiding something. They were like children, really. Let them get away with anything, and they would. It was so pathetic and wretched too, because they had the potential! Yes, they had the potential! If they only applied themselves, they could succeed, they would succeed. But they didn't. They didn't think like me, they didn't work like me, even if they could. They could, and yet they refused. They just stayed in their backwards thinking! It was the very definition of maddening!

I took the quinine and dissolved it into my drink, then drank. There was really nothing to be done about it except to continue. They could be persuaded one day. Until then, there was work to be done. Categorization, that was the thing to do! Ensure that every difference, no matter how minute, could be cataloged. Differences in skull shape, differences in skull size. Differences in behavior, differences in thought. Give every difference a name, give every type a word, and then things would be organized. It was, in a way, the most pure scientific endeavor ever undertaken, wasn't it? Simple observation on a mass scale on the most complex thing of all: man. Then use all those types, those newly understood types! Make hypotheses! Make progress! One day, they would solve all of Africa's problems.

After all, no matter how much the natives might deny it, I was one of them. I was one of their number. Their struggle was my struggle, and their problems my problems. The problems had to be solved.

The general sat there, the order in sealed wax before him. He picked it up, dropped it, and picked it up again. He stared at the campfire. He put the order back down again.

He picked it up.

Fear is defining. Our fears make us who we are. Everyone has lines they refuse to cross, things they refuse to do. What are these but fears? Fears of the consequences, or fears of what you might become. And true, fear can be overcome. There are stronger things in this world than fear. But dare you face it? He who fights monsters risks becoming one, and when you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back. Love can conquer fear. But in doing so, in slaying that fear, one removes one more restriction, one more constraint. The hero strides boldly into the darkness, crosses into the valley of death, defeats fear, and retrieves the elixir of life. But upon his return, we recognize it. The hero has defeated fear, but the hero is no longer quite human. We fear becoming the hero as much as we yearn for it.

In that wax seal, in that hastily penned order, he saw the death of gentlemanly warfare. Assault would be impossible against such weapons. They would be used on the natives, of course. But skin, skin was only skin deep. All men bleed alike. These new weapons would make assault impossible, would bury the fields with corpses. The screeching rasp of the machine gun and the indiscriminate hand of the poison cloud would be set upon the enemy. And soon enough, these new-grown weeds would return to Europe. You reap what you sow. Live by the sword.

Die by the sword.

And the guns came to life. They swept back and forth, tearing and shredding flesh with fearful efficiency. The enemy was already charging, and their momentum was forcing them forward even if they now knew the futility of it. To try and turn back was to be trampled to death. To go forward was to leap into death's waiting jaws. The icy void of death had already claimed them, and the enemy soldiers

were now only apparitions, only ghosts waiting for their bodies to catch up to them in the hereafter. The enemy lines did not break and they could not break. Three dozen French dead. Three thousand dead Africans.

Their kingdom was laid low. Chivalry was dead. The general would return to France and tutor a young Dodd before eventually dying of liver failure. Together, they both would become role models for the African diaspora. Successful, powerful, destroyers of ancient kingdoms. Years later, the colony would rebel, and Dodd would go to put the rebellion down. Again, they tried to resist. But war had grown more terrible still, and the rattle of the machine guns and the thunder of artillery came pouring down. The last Amazon stood on a lonely hill. Her breast was shot off, then her arm was blasted to shreds by metal shards, then a bullet tore open her gut. The chemicals spread through the air and dissolved her lungs, and the corpse burned to a charred skeleton.

With no one left to carry its banner, Dahomey faded into the sands of time. States would rise again in Africa, patchwork Frankensteinian abominations of a post-colonial era, but none would be Dahomey. No one was left to bleed for it. It became just a memory, then just a name, then something even less than that.

Those shots echoed around the world before the general had even issued his orders. The dogs of war had stirred. Fire at Fashoda, ground stained with Dervish blood, cannon firing blindly into the dark interior. The maxim of the age was Maxim.

The general picked up the order with shaky hands. Live by the sword.

Die by the sword.

Atrocity. That was the only real way to describe what was happening to his people.

It had started with a special tongue the border peasants had called Viadrinisch, a sort of bastardization of both the German and the Polish languages. It was only a dialect, but that would change. As Max Weinrich would later say, a language is a dialect with an army. The ruling class of Corona was weary of constantly switching between Polish and German depending on the region, and the accents they were raised with gave away their regions of origin, permitting more factionalism and regionalism in the government. Much like it did in England, a change had to be made.

Thus, the Coronan nobility began to speak a Polish-German hybrid. German words but Polish spellings and pronunciations. It distinguished them from the lower class and made them sound sophisticated, despite the new dialect being a mangling of both languages. Soon enough, however, the middle class began to imitate their masters. Panicked, the nobility introduced more and more German words in an attempt to stay avant-garde. By the late 19th century, all but the most basic Polish words had been replaced by German equivalents. As the middle class traveled the country, they spread their tongue to the lower class. By the time of the heist, Polish had been relegated to distant rural villages. Coronan had taken over the country. When Pilsudski restored Poland, his first order of business was to return standard Polish to schools in a desperate attempt to save the language. He judged his new subjects not by their race or occupation, but by their loyalty to the old ways (or new ways, depending on your point of view). Though his efforts took with the children, the elderly and middle-aged resisted hard. Here was a man trying to force some outdated ancestral language on them! Following World War II, Coronan returned in full force on both the Soviet and Western side of Corona. As the century dragged on, glottal shifts occurred in Coronan, to accommodate some of the more difficult to pronounce words and make sounds more natural. By the time the new millennium rolled in, Polish was all but extinct, though it was still studied as a literary language. Life went on.

Not enough food, not enough food. Split what we had six ways, and everyone would starve. Split it five ways, and it would be enough, barely. His chances of making it through the first year were slim, anyways.

Still, he could not bring himself to use the knife. When he placed the little baby in the tub, it gurgled softly and clapped. He withheld the water. He placed his hands around the child's neck but could not squeeze.

God have mercy.

He would take the baby on a hike. That would be the plan. He picked up the child, and it cooed at him. The fireflies were dancing, little angels to light up the darkness. The snow glowed white on the mountain path tonight. The stone altar awaited him at the peak, shaded from the world by the Baobab tree.

The tree had once so offended God that it was forever cursed to live upside, roots dangling in the air.

God have mercy.

The rain came down, smashing the snow into slush. He balanced himself, steadied his hands against rocks, and began the slow ascent up the rain-slicked steps.

Lo, there was a rider on a red tank, and I rejoiced at his coming.

Pilsudski was in the middle of the language change, or erasure as it were. He was an ardent nationalist determined to bring down Corona and lift the yoke of the Hohenzollern family, freeing Polish from its German oppressors. Never mind that they had ruled at least some part of Poland ever since gaining the Duchy of Prussia, and that their capital had been in Polish soil ever since the Thirty Years' War nearly three centuries prior. Never mind that intermarrying had made their branch just as Slavic as it was German. He was a great man, and it

is not necessary for a great man to be good or right. It is only necessary for them to bend the world to their will. He and his organization of death squads had killed many Russian and Coronan officials over the past few years, but their funds were running low. But now was the perfect chance to both secure money and strike a blow. Only by defeating both Corona and Russia could Poland be freed.

Pilsudski was a man of steel, ready to die for his cause. There was a train carrying hundreds of thousands of roubles in tax back to Moscow. He would lead the raid personally.

That day, he wouldn't just rob a train. He would destroy an empire. Much has been made of the great cost of the war and outdated Russian organization and infrastructure. However, it was Pilsudski that personally struck the killing blow. The country went bankrupt and collapsed. In the waning hours of WWI, he would personally lead an army of radical nationalists and defeat Coronan royalists and American dough-boys alike, forcing the Allied hand to recognize Polish independence and dismantle the Coronan state. The seeds of World War II had been stolen into the earth by heist.

The old texts by Pilsudski had stirred a fire in their hearts. Pilsudski hadn't succeeded in restoring the Polish identity, but he had unified the country. Before, what was Corona? A motley assortment of lands all ruled by the Hohenzollerns. You weren't Coronan, you were a Pole, or a Prussian, or a Saxon, and you just happened to be in a country together. Following WWII, Corona attempted to distance itself from Germany as much as possible. They turned to the writings of Pilsudski. But what had been done for political expediency soon turned into fact, and the ideas spread across the wall. They weren't just various peoples, they had an identity! Pilsudski had given it to them! They were the Coronans! Their land, it was theirs by blood and rights. The fire was burning, it was growing. They could not suppress the light.

And in the late 1980s, it surged over and became a firestorm, and the whole world marveled at the light. The fire burned, and it burned

with a single word: "Solidarity".

The baby was on the altar, rain falling all around. Esau stared at the stone slab. He raised his arms and readied his hammer. He lowered them again.

He couldn't. He couldn't do it.

Mr. Jacob had returned, and spotted Esau atop the mountain. He began to sprint up the steps. His pouch fell, scattering grains of quinine all over the slushy earth.

Esau screamed into the ether.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" shouted Mr. Jacob.

"I don't know! I don't know!" screamed Esau.

"You goddamned savage! You barbarian! I treat you with the utmost generosity, let you keep your unearned privileges, and you repay me with this? Monster! Animal!"

"God have mercy! God have mercy on my soul!"

And Mr. Jacob stared, flaming daggers in his eyes.

"Beast! Wretch!"

"My father, who art in heaven..."

"Your pagan gods can't hear you know."

"God have mercy!"

The wind was howling all around, the dulcet tones of a holy choir, one composed of fifteen million one-armed angels.

A lightning bolt pierced through the storm, hitting the baobab tree. With a terrible, shuddering crack, it splintered. The world slowed to a crawl as Esau watched the limbs of the tree drop. And the altar was buried under the boughs, and the altar was silenced by the wood.

And Esau wept bitterly, for he was a wanderer in the wastes and the manna from heaven was gone.

Over the past three weeks, I had settled into a simple routine. I would have my breakfast, stretch, do some squats, then go for a walk through the city with my notepad, taking care to move cautiously whenever signs of fighting were near. In retrospect, I had become comfortable.

When I came back that afternoon, the house was burnt down.

"Hands in the air! Don't resist!" shouted someone. I complied.

"Why are you here? Are you working for the CIA?"

"Imperialist western pig!"

"Why do you hate us? We just want to be free. We just want to choose our own destinies. And yet, and yet you put all these obstacles in our way."

I felt the spit hit the back of the head. Then the cold steel of a Makarov was pressed against my forehead.

"Tell us why you're here, and no bullshit!"

"I'm here to report on the protests."

"Bullshit!"

He kicked me in the gut, and the air was forced out of me. I struggled to regain my breath.

"Report, huh? Well, here they are! Look at beautiful Xinjiang province and its natural beauty! Protests! Ha!"

"Why do you hate us? We're not of the same kind as the Han. We're not the same race. We should be independent, shouldn't we?"

"Britain lost its empire, France lost its empire, yet China gets to stay here and oppress us? Hardly fair."

"We have a natural right to self-determination."

I couldn't answer them.

"No answer? No answer! You stay here, support the regime, and yet you have no answer! No apology! Nothing! NOTHING!"

I held my breath and closed my eyes.

I heard the gunshot and opened my eyes again. I wasn't dead. I turned my head. One of my captors was shaking in shock, and then three shots went into him. Two in the chest, one in the head.

Standing right there was Uncle Zhou, Desert Eagle in hand. He grabbed me and hoisted me onto his shoulders. I could feel thick cords of muscle roiling beneath the fat. People were shouting, and I heard the approach of footsteps.

"No time to explain, we've got to get moving," said Zhou.

He started to run towards the edge of the city.

"I thought you hated-"

"Wouldn't trade mine for the world," he replied, as he vaulted over a concrete barrier.

He quickly turned, pulled a grenade from his belt, tossed it backwards, said "Frag out", then ducked into another alley. I heard it thump behind us. The footsteps were still getting closer.

The desert stretched out into eternity. The footsteps were almost upon us now. He threw me into the sands, and I felt their burning heat stinging at my face.

"Just go, I can deal with them!" shouted Zhou.

I got up, looked back.

"Run! Trust me, I know the Djibouti shooty, they can't stop me," said Zhou.

I ran.

The burning sands were there to take me. I ran, ran until my feet were blistered and my soles were aching. I ran until the acidic fire in my legs was boiling over. I ran until I was on my hands and knees, earth slowly burying me. I crawled up and felt the desert rage against me. Silently, I prayed for death.

They had formed a circle by the Warsaw Wall. Each of them bowed, turned, and bowed again. They began to dance a Mazurka. The Soviet tanks came rolling in. What was going through that tanker's head? He would recollect, of course, but memory is untrustworthy. The T-80 stared down the circle. A girl, fair-skinned and blonde-haired, stared the barrel down. The hatch swung open, a face peeked out. The girl stood there, defiant. The boy climbed down from his war machine. The girl, she raised her eyebrows. He extended his hand and asked his question in a halting, heavily accented, unpracticed Coronan.

"May I have this dance?"

She took his hand and held it.

And as the dance whirled and twirled, song began to overtake the crowds.

All those days watching from the windows

All those years outside looking in

All that time never even knowing

Just how blind I've been

Now I'm here blinking in the starlight

Now I'm here suddenly I see

Standing here it's all so clear

I'm where I'm meant to be

As more and more joined in, some went back and got their traditional lanterns out. It had been almost two hundred years since the return of Rapunzel, but the lanterns flew again, a million sparkling suns set loose in the gray sky.

And at last I see the light

And it's like the fog has lifted

And at last I see the light

And it's like the sky is new

And it's warm and real and bright

And the world has somehow shifted

All at once everything looks different

Now that I see you

Then silence. The crowd on the Soviet side stood, immobile, afraid that their hope would shattered, that it could all come tumbling down.

No response. No answer. Had they been abandoned?

A single voice rose up in trembling from the other side, the squeak of a boy who was not yet even ten. As he pushed his way through the first line, voice wavering, others joined in. First a few, then some, then a great mass all singing together, the baritone of the people singing the people's song, a prayer of hope floating across the wall.

All those days chasing down a daydream

All those years living in a blur

All that time never truly seeing

Things, the way they were

Now she's here shining in the starlight

Now she's here suddenly I know

If she's here it's crystal clear

I'm where I'm meant to go

And now together they sang, both sides of the wall, daring it to fall like those of ancient Jericho.

And at last I see the light

And it's like the fog has lifted

The tanker looked his dancing partner in her warm green eyes, then told her he'd be right back. 17.4 megajoules. He took aim and sent a shot flying straight at the wall. He shouted back at his comrades, then cajoled the tank into action. It accelerated then smashed straight into the wall. 17.4 megajoules. It's the kinetic energy imparted by a direct impact from a moving T-80. Unto him had been given a great sword, and he would give peace to all the nations. The wall crumbled before the force of his tank, but they needed more.

One by one, his comrades, unfroze from their shock. Suddenly, a frenzy of shouting Russian voices. They had choices to make.

And one by one, the tanks made war on the Warsaw Wall.

It fell apart. For the first time in forever, the two sides were staring at each other, seeing each other face to face.

And at last I see the light

And it's like the sky is new

And it's warm and real and bright

And the world has somehow shifted

All at once everything is different

Now that I see you

Now that I see you

The crowds ran towards each other and melded together. Hand in hand, they danced a dance. They danced a dance together. The Cold War was over.

He who fights monsters risks becoming one, and when you stare into the abyss, it also stares back into you. But there is power in being monstrous, and sometimes? Sometimes that beast also has beauty.

Love would thaw a frozen world.

I was woken up by the splash of cool water. I blinked and shook my head, briefly catching a glimpse of two horsemen, before dozing off again.

When I woke up again, I was in a tent. I got up and left it. There was a soldier outside, and he gestured for me to follow him. He led me

into a command tent.

"Ah, you're awake. How are you doing?" asked the man waiting there.

"Who are you? Where am I?" I asked.

"I am Colonel Ku Tianzi. You're in my command tent."

"Why were there horses? What's going on?"

"Why were there horses? Hmm. That's a long story, so I'll give you the short version. Qing modernization efforts looked good to the outside world, but were actually riddled with internal corruption. As such, when we took control of the country, much of the army was still and continues to be under-equipped. It's hard to arm a country so big. Steppe horses are still useful for what they do, and don't need fuel like helicopters. Say, are you an American?"

"Yes, why?"

"I can always tell, you know. They've got a certain earnest honesty to their faces and trustworthiness to their movements. Look, I don't know what the traitors have told you, but it's all lies."

"Eh?"

"It's like your president Lincoln. Lincoln, now there was a great man! He's a personal hero of mine. What we're doing... may seem excessive, or inhumane. But we're safeguarding democracy, you see? Letting a small and vocal minority get their way is antithetical to democracy! It places the will of a small Hui minority higher than the will of the billion others in this great country. Ridiculous!"

"But what about self-determination?"

"Oh please. My ancestors were Korean, and I hold a local majority in the vicinity of my house. Does that give my house a right to secede

from China? Make no mistake, this is a power play. And I will burn their Atlanta."

He sighed.

"Look, it may sound noble, the things they're doing. But look at how the Middle East is going! Radical Islamism and chaos everywhere. Those jets are going on their bombing runs. We only have those jets because... because we're a close US ally. They only sell such weapons to their close friends. What happens if they succeed? By the Soviet ethnography system, there must be hundreds of minorities in China! Will they all secede next, and break this ancient country into pieces? Thousands of years of history lost for the sake of some petty nationalistic conceit! It won't happen. It can't happen. This isn't clean business, but freedom isn't free."

I must have nodded because he smiled.

"Remember, a house divided against itself cannot stand."

Before I knew it, I was on a train back to Beijing and normalcy. The music droned softly through the speakers.

Your lipstick stains on the front lobe of my left side brains

I knew I wouldn't forget you

And so I went and let you blow my mind

Your sweet moonbeam

The smell of you in every single dream I dream

I knew when we collided you're the one I have decided

Who's one of ***my kind***

Energy having left me, I fell asleep.

Their efforts were already doomed. I didn't know at the time, but they had no foreign support. The main rebel faction had named itself the Uygur People's Liberation Army to try and attract Soviet aid, but the USSR was already teetering towards collapse, and in no position to send support. Meanwhile, the US, always willing to protect western regimes, even ones run by dictators, let alone a liberal democracy, already had CIA agents in the field. Their movement was doomed. But even a doomed man can fight. It was five months before government forces finished securing Xinjiang province. By then, 450,000 had died. Some had died in the fighting. Others had died as order disintegrated. Three square meals is all that separates man from the animals. Still others had died as the rebels turned on each other. They couldn't defeat the Chinese army, but they could defeat each other. Sometimes you take the little victories. Not all of them had Communist sympathies, after all, and the radical nationalists turned on the radical socialists and vice versa. By the time bombing ramped up to full force, their movement had already lost coherence.

I returned to my office and turned in my story. When I saw that it had been bumped off the front page by the news of a school shooting, I stared at the page for a good ten minutes. Then I called my boss and gave him his two weeks' notice. I never went back.

The ringing of the doorbell stirred me from my stupor, just in time for me to catch a brutal execution. Some claimant or other had fouled up and paid the price. Win or die, or something like that. Could they really show that on TV? I shrugged internally and got up.

A young Chinese man was waiting at the door. He gulped.

"Mr. Weinburg?" asked the man.

"Yes?" I responded.

He held out a battered and beaten card.

"Mr. Weinburg, you saved my life."

And maybe that was enough.

Five minutes before the meeting with Milken. He gazed out through the plate glass, taking in the sights and sounds of New York.

Compound interest was a beautiful thing. Time plus money equaled lots and lots of money. Millions into billions and billions into untold sums. A 5% share in the Bjorgman Multinational Group, a company formerly known as Bjorgman Water, plus time.

Corporations and corporate interests were the future, after all. And a company serves the wishes of its investors. Be the biggest investor of all, and your wishes can come true. When money talks, people listen. And when trade and prosperity is weighed against war, trade often wins, especially given rising materialism. Greed is good. Greed is peace.

Like many powerful men, he did his best work from the shadows. How much did people know about the families running powerful companies? Cargill would be ranked 9th on the Fortune 500 if it wasn't a family affair. Hardly your typical mom-and-pop farm. Even in the information age, family mattered. The New Imperialism was over, but that didn't mean imperialism was dead. As the West pulled out, they left their companies and organizations behind. These were his hooks and crooks, the tools of his trade.

It was dirty business, to be sure, but such was the cost of peace. Corruption and cronyism abounded, much to his chagrin. But things could get better, it just took time, patience, and effort. Time was not in short supply for him. Lesser men might be changed or twisted by the system. He knew he never would be. It was worth it for peace. Peace was grandfathers getting to meet grandchildren. Peace was grandmothers living to bake cookies for grateful young'uns. Peace was brothers and sons not being lost in the distant muds of some callous field. Peace was boring. But, after all, it was a curse to live in interesting times.

He looked at the door. There was a reindeer standing straight up, wearing a three-piece suit and monocle, top-hat precariously perched atop his antlers. The man put his best nose on and straightened his tie again.

All hail the new Lord of the Earth.

His name was Olaf, and he liked warm hugs.

On Skulldeath Mountain

Anna didn't ever shut up. Yet another sleepless night, and she was waiting right there outside the door.

"Hey Elsa, did you know about that boat when you thawed everything?" asked Anna.

"Yes."

No.

"I plan everything out. I'm very smart like that," said Elsa.

What a load of shit.

"Didn't it hurt our economy to embargo Weselton?" asked Anna.

"No, if you look at the economic data, the terms of trade were heavily in our favor. We could easily find another buyer, while Weselton was hard pressed to find another seller. It was a calculated punishment."

It really wasn't, she just didn't like that guy.

"Why didn't Hans just shoot you?"

"We've gone over this, he was trying to look like the good guy while still putting me in danger."

It was really hard to be properly melancholy while Anna asked all these questions.

"Why is the sky blue?"

"Atmospheric refraction."

"Magic, got it."

But she had to be sad, her fiftieth birthday was rapidly approaching. A time to reflect upon just how little she had actually accomplished. Another year full of regrets and half-finished work. Another ste-

"How come it took me forever to get up the mountain while you got there immediately?"

"Did you know there's a road up the mountain?"

"Yess... no."

Another step towards death.

"If you crying was all it took to thaw me, why didn't everything get fixed sooner? I mean, you cry a lot. I mean a lot."

"I... what? The act of true love was you sacrificing yourself for me!"

"What, really? Everything makes so much more sense now!"

"Anna, this was **your** adventure! I had to learn about everything after the fact! First I go make a nice comfy castle, then you show up, then there are soldiers and why is your dick fiancee there and then suddenly chandeliers and everything is confusing and then I'm locked up and... and... argh! Were you even paying attention?"

"I want to say... 'no'? But it was me that saved you! Hooray!"

"..."

"I love you."

Elsa sighed.

"I love you too."

"Why are you so grumpy?"

"... I guess... I guess I thought I would've made more of myself by now. I've been alive for almost fifty years now, and look at what I've done. Look at what I am. There's something romantic and captivating about the perfect, reserved Queen. Even the icy Sorceress up on her lonely citadel, that was interesting, that was something to be intrigued by. There's something tragic and noble about the monster. But now? Well, I'm just plain old Elsa. Now that Alex is dead, my closest friend that isn't family is literally a reindeer. I can't hold a conversation outside of the usual graceful Queen act because my main hobby is math, and you know how interesting that is to most people. You know Count Lukow? Short guy, brown hair, visited last month? I literally bored him to sleep while talking about Wilson's theorem. I'm a shut-in who doesn't sleep enough and spends all of her time looking at paperwork. Paperwork, Anna, paperwork! I've had thirty years to get to know myself... and I guess the mystery has worn off. I just... never thought I could be so boring. I'm fifty and I'm boring. Teenage me was... eh... but at least she wasn't boring! At least she still had dreams!"

"Don't worry, we can make you a monster again! Hmmm, what deep dark secrets do you have...? I know! QUEEN ELSA! SHE... SHE POOPS! SHE BLEEDS FROM HER VAGINA AND IT DOES NOT STOP! How can one person have SO MUCH BLOOD? She farts from her VAGINA! DISGUSTING! MONSTER! SORCERY! I can hear the angry mob and see the pitchforks already! Ooooooh, it's going to be so great!"

"I really don't think that will work."

"Sure it will! It'll be just like old times. Or maybe we could get you a new boat, or a hot young man to sex up. Maybe a gun that also shoots swords! They can make those, right?"

"No."

"If you're that worried about being bored, we can always do something fun. Why don't we invade Denmark or Sweden?"

"No!"

"We can crush them like skull of pig! Corona plus United States plus Russia plus Arendelle equals kill Sweden!"

"NO!"

"But... but... I hate Danes and Swedes! I thought you hated them too?"

"I do, but this really isn't an appropriate time! There's business to take care of. I have to go inspect the new water network up north. While I'm gone, I need you to oversee the Summer Fair. Supplies are already stockpiled in the warehouse by the docks, all you have to do is make sure the workers don't slack off. Got it?"

"You can count on me!"

As soon as Elsa had left town, Anna called up a number of contacts from a wide variety of industries. It was time to do some business. Serious business for serious people.

"It's a feature, your Highness," said the engineer.

"Orange water is a feature?" asked Elsa.

"Well, yeah. You can use it to paint."

"And if it's flammable?"

"Heat source for the cold winters."

"So nobody made a mistake here. You're telling me this was all intentional."

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

The man turned around.

"Jig's up, she isn't buying it." "FUCK!"

"So what's really happening?"

"Rock types here aren't good, shit's going over budget, and we don't have enough pipe. We planned on a nice little tree covering all of the parishes, but the routes we thought would work turned out to be impassable. We ended up taking a few shortcuts and cutting corners."

"Well, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing ri-... eh. It's worth doing okay-ish."

"Yeah, let's do this!"

There was a moment of brief elation and cheers of joy, followed very quickly by the solemn retrieval of slide rules, graph paper, and pencils.

For more than a few moments, Elsa was absolutely sure that sleep deprivation was making her hallucinate. It had taken more than a few all-nighters, and last night she had only gotten three hours of shut-eye, hardly enough to make up for the work she'd be doing. But no matter how many times she blinked, it was still there.

There was a giant death citadel right there! Right there! She practically fell out of the carriage. A woman was standing there, watching her child prance and swing around the fortress's spiky exterior. It was a jungle gym before jungle gyms were cool. Or invented, for that matter.

"Excuse me? Ma'am?" asked Elsa.

"Oh! Your Majesty!" replied the dumpy woman.

"What exactly is going on?"

"Huh? It's the summer fair."

"Yeah but... this."

Elsa gestured at the colossal spiky structure.

"OH! Oh! Well, at first I thought that the end had come and a thousand years of darkness was nigh, the troll prophecy finally having been fulfilled, and I was scared because I thought demons were going to come and tear off my skin to use as upholstery. But then someone told me there was free food here, and there was! My head hasn't exploded yet, so it must be safe."

"Right."

"I hope that helps!"

"It does. Thank you."

Did she rule over a kingdom of idiots? Anna had told her that the people had accepted her powers readily because she was a good person. But maybe, just maybe, it was because they were so dumb they would accept anything as long as they got free shit.

Incredible. If the apocalypse came, everyone would run towards it wondering what all the hubbub was about.

Did no one else care that this thing was clearly evil? Children were playing around it and nobody cared. The blasted thing was covered in spikes and skulls! It was jet black! Apparently it wasn't a cause for concern at all, because nobody seemed to mind socializing around it or accepting free "Sinister sausages" to eat. She had to get to the bottom of this.

Many more people were milling around that aforementioned food stall, and Elsa sidled on over, eager to solve the mystery of the giant evil fortress. One of those present was the Count of Oslo, looking

ever so regal as he hopped up and down, his face grotesquely twisted as he whined for more soup. Much to the chagrin and disappointment of his tutors, he was still unable to count past five. His sixth birthday was rapidly approaching, and those closest to him worried that he would suffer an existential crisis at its passing. To be six in a world lacking six is to know true fear.

Or maybe not. Eventually the steady diminishing of his wealth would drive him to find a job. He would grow up to write pulp novels about the American Midwest, despite not going and in fact never going there. Contrary to popular belief, Kit Carson was not twelve feet tall, he did not breath fire, he could not kill Injuns with his mind, his voice could not shatter mountains, and his dick was not comparable in size to a horse's. He was rather short, he breathed regular air, he would fail at times, as all people do, including one tragic incident in which the woman he was about to rescue had a book about his exploits with her, a poignant juxtaposition between the breathless power of myth and the cruel facts of reality, he was soft-spoken and quiet, and his dick was probably way bigger than a horse's. Like... huge. Probably the size of a redwood tree. Yeah. PENIS.

Elsa wouldn't live to see that, and she probably wouldn't have cared anyways. She bumped past another man, one barely out of his carpentry apprenticeship. He would have trouble dating, but eventually bump into another young woman. Both desperate for companionship, they would settle into a somewhat loveless relationship and have a daughter together. His professional life would be uninteresting, but he would stumble into a peculiar property of certain materials under certain conditions, something he filed away as a curiosity. Eventually, after discovering his wife had been having an affair, he would kill himself by jumping off Elsa and Anna Fiveever Bridge. The water was starting to freeze over, and his body would hit an ice floe, splattering to near unrecognizability. While going through his old possessions, his daughter would discover his notes, and those were sold and would find their way to Brazil, where they, and many other ideas, would be incorporated into the design of an eyebar used to build the Hercilio Luz Bridge.

Again, irrelevant.

Someone finally noticed that the Queen was among them, and he hastily bowed.

"Your Majesty!" said the man.

"Hello. There's a giant fortress here," said Elsa.

"Yes."

"Doesn't that bother anyone?"

"Why would it? It's part of the fair."

"But it's covered in spikes and skulls."

"So is Princess Anna, but that doesn't bother anyone either."

"Well, where did it come from?"

"I don't know, but your sister said it was safe, so that's good enough for me."

Of course it was Anna's fault. When was it ever not?

Wow. Cynical bitch mode engaged.

Elsa sighed and walked towards another crowd. There was a black-armored knight in the middle. A knight in this day and age? Ridiculous. Absurd. Then he started juggling. Well, at least he acknowledged how silly this whole thing was.

"Remember kids, if you don't brush your teeth, you'll be taken away by the DOOM MONSTER of DOOM," said the black knight, his voice deep and menacing.

And also vaguely familiar.

"Kristoff?" asked Elsa.

"Oh, hey Elsa," replied Kristoff.

"What on earth is going on here?"

"A summer fair."

"But uhhhh..."

"Anna made me do it."

"Figures. Do you know where she is?"

"Probably on the second floor of the fortress."

"Thanks Kristoff."

"No problem."

Elsa stormed right into the castle and stomped up the stairs. Anna was indeed waiting on the second floor.

"Anna, what is this? I didn't even leave that much building material, how is this even physically possible?" asked Elsa.

"I don't know! Wooooooo!" replied Anna.

"You don't know? You don't know where this evil castle came from?"

"Nope! But maybe, just maybe, it poofed into existence because people believed hard enough and had hope and goodness in their hearts!"

"Don't feed me that bullshit. No such thing as miracles."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not that easy, because nothing is ever that easy. Because everything is complex and hard and full of ambiguity, and I **hate** it. I just want to go back to being a monster running from Prince Charming and his stupid assassins. It was so much simpler."

"But it wasn't right. Elsa, is there anything familiar about this castle?"

"Other than it being the usual blackly grim stuff you've grown so fond of after the war?"

"Look at the floor. Look at the ceiling. Please, just humor me."

And there they were, hiding in plain sight. A million snowflakes danced around the obsidian floor, sparkling fractals glowing like stars against the night black floor. She could feel the patterns in her bones.

"This is my castle from the North Mountain..." said Elsa.

"It's amazing what a little bit of paint and some skulls can do, huh? I'll admit, I thought I would have to add spikes, but it was already really really spiky in there."

"I... I don't..."

"They love it, Elsa. They love the whole design of it, they love playing in and around it."

"It's just so obviously **evil**."

"No, it's beautiful. You're beautiful. What's on the outside doesn't matter! In fact, what's on the inside doesn't matter either! I mean, look at the inside of this place. I put in a bunch of statues of human corpses, and the eyeball bowl has real eyeballs in it. But that doesn't matter, it doesn't matter at all. You know why they love this place so much? Free sausages. They love it, even if it's awful and horrible and monstrous on the inside, because it gives them the sausage."

And that's you, Elsa. Everyone loves you, because you give them the sausage. You give them the sausage every day."

"That's really sweet... I think."

"My love for you is like the surrender of my enemies: unconditional and total, punctuated by the weeping of the conquered and the gnashing of teeth. You're the greatest and the bestest, and there's no one more gooder than you. Happy birthday."

"Thank you," said Elsa, tears forming in her eyes as she tried to hold back a smile.

"Also I scribbled over all of your maps."

The castle was scheduled to be taken down at the end of the fair, but the overseer got sick and the project was delayed a week. But then other work came up, and the workers were drawn back towards the endless sprawling expansion and enlargement of Bergen. Weeks turned into months, and months into a year. At this point, the fair committee decided to reuse the castle. Having done it two years in a row, it now became an annual tradition, or at least that was the justification given by the committee in regards to continued use of the castle. And as years turned to decades, the ramshackle castle became an institution.

Of course, it wasn't without problems. Elsa found it rather hard to deal with the Swedish and Danish propaganda that Arendelle was an Empire of Evil when there was a literal evil citadel sitting right outside of Bergen. But traditions have inertia, and any attempt to tear it down would be impossible at that late date, with legions of angry parents wondering why their children were about to be denied the authentic Bloodmurder Castle experience.

Lovers shared first kisses underneath it, illuminated by rays of moonlight tinted blood-red through stained glass windows. Children played in it, scrambling to explore its heights and depths,

occasionally poking the corpses of some of those who had gone before. A colony of bats moved into the central chamber, providing endless hours of fun and fright for the little ones, as well as freedom from insects for everyone else. The guano was harvested and used by chemists and biologists eager to do research. Generations of young women would discover the magic of masturbation by using some of the smaller spikes as makeshift dildos. And, bit by bit, Bloodmurder Castle became a part of everyday life, no odder than the grocer or the post office.

And as the years passed, Bloodmurder Castle stood there unbowed, a bulwark against the wicked winds of trying times. Brothers turned on brothers, sisters killed sisters, and children betrayed parents as the Cultural Revolution swept through Norway. But then Mao's cronies targeted Bloodmurder Castle, and that is where they erred. They called it a living symbol of monarchist oppression and the old bourgeois ways, a monument to capitalist decadence and autocratic rule. It was an artifact of the old ways and the old times, and it had to be swept away to bring in the new. But Bloodmurder was more than just a castle. Generations had lived in its shadow, sharing bits and pieces of their lives. It was woven into a thousand stories and experiences, little shards of nostalgia and tiny tales of happier times. Together, those little shards were stronger. When all those little shards added up, when all the little strings were tied together, they formed a cultural tapestry. It was part of their way of life, and it would not change. After all, isn't that what a castle should be? Something durable and unbreakable, something to stand against the sieges of the foe and come out triumphant? And the thuggish political cliques looked upon it, and they despaired, for there was the soul of the people, and it was not something so easily broken. The Cultural Revolution was dead, sacrificed on the altar of Bloodmurder Castle.

The grinning skull sat atop the tallest spire of Bloodmurder Castle, and it looked upon the assembled crowd. It grinned because these were the people, and their hearts were full of love. Nostalgia is a form of love, after all. It is a love of the past, but more importantly, it is a love of innocence and purity, a purity that cannot exist in an

imperfect world tainted by the cold logic of knowledge. They held this love because they were creatures of love. The skull grinned, for the sight was worthy of it. The skull grinned because the people were there, and the people were kind and good and beautiful and true.

Then time passed, as it always does. An armored convoy made its way down the harsh mountain roads. They had been laid haphazardly and named rather peculiarly, and there were even rumors that Princess Anna had merely doodled them into existence. It had been extremely difficult to build at first. But as they carved their way through the mountains and scarred the bitter earth, the workers had learned. They learned the most efficient way to use their nitroglycerin, and they developed techniques to safeguard the macadam against winter potholes. Those techniques spread, and teams of men blasted their way through the Rocky Mountains, finally tying the United States together, making a nation out of disconnected states. And that nation now returned, golden eagles splayed in glorious triumph, armored convoy rolling down the Norwegian roads. They got off the highway and turned onto Picture of Olaf Smoking a Cigar Boulevard. Their precious cargo stepped onto the sidewalk. It was a momentous day.

Under the shadow of Bloodmurder, two great empires met, not for war, but for peace. Two hands shook. One handshake formed out of them. That day, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks began. Though the Cold War wasn't over yet, it was a START or II.

Then the years flew by again. Walls fell, empires fell. Mobsters and armed gangs rose, then things returned, more or less, to normalcy. Dane and Swede came to Norway, but they did not come as invaders. They came to break bread in the house of their ancestral enemy, and together they celebrated. For they were brothers, and they were dead, but now they lived again. They had been lost but now they were found. Their father was long dead, but the prodigal sons had finally returned. The old hatreds had gone, making space for brand new hatreds. They would face the new century together, as a Nordic Economic Union. Still, the old kings of Arendelle could not

but chuckle in their gilded graves whenever a hapless Danish tourist read his directions.

Take the Store Ringvei to the E-18, then take the left lane at Skulldeath Mountain until you reach the Trollstigen Mountain Road, then continue until you reach Really should not be drawing such a huge bulge on Kristoff this is inappropriate Road. Turn right onto Lars Hilles Gate, arriving at destination on right. Many a tourist would read these words and immediately turn back. Others would press bravely on, to be rewarded with a comfy night at Bloodmurder Castle, an experience that was fun for the whole family.

A symbol is ultimately what the world makes of it. Bloodmurder Castle had become a symbol of peace. It symbolized brotherhood and unity, it symbolized reconciliation, it symbolized standing true for beliefs that were just and noble. It symbolized a world unmarred by petty hatreds and untouched by the horrors of war. When the government announced Bloodmurder Day, a holiday devoted to the cause of world peace, it surprised no one except for filthy Swedes and stupid Danes and surly Finns and ignorant Americans and thrice-damned continentals and perfidious Brits and smelly Arabs and the UN Human Rights Comission, which launched an investigation to make sure the holiday wasn't some sort of excuse for human sacrifice or something like that. Begrudgingly, Bloodmurder Castle was added to the list of World Heritage sites.

And the world turned implacably onwards.

Occident

The cicadas buzzed their workman's song as the curious songbirds supped on their ambrosial nectar, pollen lightly dusted on their haunches. Leaves fluttered downwards, little boats catching the western wind to sail towards freedom. The ranks and files of the grass meld together into a single verdent sheet of green. A single soldier ant stretches skyward, chitinous mandibles glistening with beads of water. It gazes out towards the dewdrops speckling the field, and turns back towards its kin and countrymen, ready for the day's communion. And in the field, the swords stand righteous, their crossguards crucifixes poised below the rising dawn. The rotting head of the last Hohenstaufen Emperor rests at last, the burdens of the world finally lifted from it.

And as the players played and the choir sang, the dancing of the gnats reached furious intensity, for the trembling hold of the baritone voices was guarded well. Carrion belles dined at the celebratory feast, grease stains splattering onto their fine white suits. Actors acted and players played, and the thrashing of the cymbals had brought about the sound and the fury. The parts had been well-known and well-practiced, for long had the stage been set.

More than half a millenium before, the curtains had risen. Enter Charlemagne and his brother Carloman. Tensions were high between the two, an obvious consequence of them having to share power. War seemed imminent. Then, suddenly and mysteriously, and without good reason, Carloman suddenly died. It was one of life's little miracles. Charlemagne was now undisputed king. His armies would build an empire. In this field the Saxons would be broken, their kings made humble. It was the first act in a European drama, a sequel to ancient Rome and its empire. At last, there was an Emperor.

"I bet Caligula could beat up Nero," said Michael.

Thomas shrugged.

"You know he could. Fiddling too strong too good," said Michael.

"Dunno, massive expenditures and animal sex is pretty overpowered," replied Thomas.

"So what are you up to?"

"Oh, I don't know... just a little something or other. Got a gift..."

"Stop teasing and tell me."

"That just takes all the fun out of it, doesn't it?"

"Oh come on. Hmmmm. Is it Plutarch?"

"Better."

"Better than Plutarch? I- no. No! Really. Really! You got it?"

"Sure did!"

"Show me!"

Thomas pulled the precious manuscript from his robes. Michael squealed with delight.

"All-Star Saint George?"

"Yes!"

"YES!"

"YEEEEEESSS!"

"SUPER ADVENTURES!"

"Truly our lots are blessed."

"Indeed. A life spent in silent contemplation of the world and the wisdom of the saints and ancients? What more could anyone ask for?"

Thomas stroked his neckbeard knowingly.

Maximilian stared out the window. The bunnies scurried about and the mice secreted away their little scraps of bread. The room was painted a rich amber by the rays of the dying Burgundian sun. Georg sat on his chair, looking at his own face reflected in the mirror-bright surface of his pike's point.

"And that's about it, I think. Georg, what do I do?" asked the young prince.

"What do you mean? Sounds clear cut to me," replied Georg.

"Is it? I may not have seen her since childhood, but this woman is still my sister. How could she be a traitor, kinslayer, and rebel?"

"The years change people, especially when you haven't seen that person since infancy. Max, you knew a baby. Since when are any babies evil? It's perfectly possible for that smiling baby to grow up into a cruel, irredeemable person. To put it crudely: shit happens."

"But this isn't just **shit happening** . This is my sister! What if dad is lying? What if there's been a huge mistake and I'm the only one who can set things right?"

"Then I have a practical suggestion for you: just go. What's the harm in it?"

"What's the harm? Oh, what's the harm in walking into an empire in discord? What's the harm in visiting a sister that might break bread with traitors and demons and witches? What could possibly go wrong?"

Georg clutched his chest.

"You wound me! A shot right through the heart! Oh, Georg, his acts of bravery and martial prowess enough to set the hearts of countless bar wenches aflutter, yet his own comrade and boon companion does not trust him. I jest, but the pain is real. You don't trust me to keep you safe?"

"I... ugh. I ought to have been born a dog, at least it would be natural for me to touch mouth to foot then. Forgive me, Georg. I didn't mean it like that."

"All is forgiven. Let's go find your sister."

Where was the damned hole? He was an able swordsman, or so he liked to think, but damn it all, it was useless if he couldn't ram the portcullis! Find the hole. Nope. Find the hole. Nope. Find the hole.

"Argh!"

"What is it?"

"You jabbed your dick in my eye, you clumsy oaf!"

Well, that certainly wasn't the hole. Still, if he rotated a bit, maybe shifted to the side. Ear today, gone tomorrow, eh? Now scooch on over and...

Ow. Ow ow ow ow ow ow ow FUCK. He was staring up at the ceiling now. More accurately, he was still staring into inky blackness, the sound of his wife serving as his only guide. Unfortunately, unlike the bat which adorned his family crest, he could not echolocate. This didn't stop him from swearing at night, it just made it for recreational rather than practical purposes.

"Who made the fucking floors out of stone? Goddamn idiots!"

"You did, dear."

"I can go fuck myself! Argh, I can't see in this blasted place. I knew we should've put our room by a window."

"What use would that be? It's night."

"The moon, you stupid woman, the moon!"

"Bah. The moon pixies don't like us invading their privacy."

"You know what I say to that? I got a suit of armor and a sword made of iron, and I can go SHOVE IT UP THEIR ASSHOLES."

"Do you need my help?"

"Hold on, I..."

He had successfully flipped around. Moments later, he screamed. His wife had fallen on him, driving his face right into the hard stone of the floor. Was his nose broken? It might be broken. Wonderful. Absolutely splendid! He yawned. Now that he really thought about it, the floor wasn't really so hard. Sleep was necessary. There could be nothing without sleep. It would be hard, it would be challenging to sleep on this floor. But all good and worthy things were difficult, were they not? Yes, he would sally forth and take this challenge. He would triumph. He would sleep on the floor!

So he did. Instinctively, these two slumberers moved to cuddle each other. Unfortunately, their instincts were geared towards a usual position in a usual place: the bed. Thus, they laid there, a tangled mess of arms and legs sprawled together, two warm bodies locked in embrace, waiting for the crack of dawn.

The differences between an Arendellan and a Swede had seemed self-evident. It was truly a shame that the Americans didn't see it the same way. Their propaganda had been very successful. The Swedes

were pilloried, cast as an invading horde of subhuman, slope-headed neanderthals bent on ruining perfect white America. Another blow had been struck against the ancestral foe. The plan seemed absolutely perfect. But unfortunately, the stupid Americans had messed it all up. To someone born and raised in the stew of cultures and borders of the Old World, the difference between Swede and Arendellan seemed comically self-evident. However, when the Queen was pulled from her carriage and viciously beaten by an angry mob, it soon became clear that the Americans were so simple that they could not see the rich and great differences between cultures, instead seeing all of them as "the weirdos with the funny habits that eat disgusting food and might fuck dogs or something i dunno lol". The motion to limit Swedish immigration and discriminate against them in public venues was rescinded.

"I hate peasants," said Michael as he peeled rotten cabbage off of his face.

"What is it now?" asked Thomas.

"They're being little shits is what! Do you see what's on my face?"

"Rotten cabbage?"

"Yes, exactly! Rotten cabbage. I try to spread literacy, and they throw rotten cabbage at me. This, this right here? This is why Rome fell. Little shits like these didn't appreciate knowledge and what they had. They take good folks like us for granted. They say if it saves one soul, it's worth it, but is it really?"

"Patience."

"Ugh. Yes, you're right."

"I know what will cheer you up."

"What? What could possibly cheer me up right now?"

"I wrote another chapter of my Charles Martel fanfiction!"

"You're right, that did cheer me up! Waaaaaiiiit, which one?"

"The modern alternate universe one."

"Sweet! Knightly adventures of The Hammer, here we come!"

And so Michael read, and the next morning he went back down to the village to teach them to read. Truth of the matter was, even without his friend's support, he would've done it anyways. After all, why else was he here? He was a man of Christ and a guardian of the old ways, a protector of the flame of knowledge. He stoked the fire carefully, making sure not to disturb its burn. He stoked it, not knowing if it would ever spread or grow again. But such was his lot. He stoked it without certainty or assurance of success because he was a man of faith, and he had faith in the fire. He had faith that the flames of knowledge would burn bright again.

Rome would not rise like a phoenix from those ashes, but the things that grew from the fire were beautiful and great regardless.

"I hate peasants," said Baron Gerfried.

"What is it now, you big whiny baby?" asked his wife Sieglinde.

"Take one guess."

"I refuse to dignify your little game."

"Fine, you shrill harpy. They were wasting my time, they're always wasting my time."

"That would imply your time has worth to be wasted."

"Ha. Funny. Whoever invented the law ought to be hanged. Lawsuits, courts, debates, all these pieces of crap are just contrivances to whittle my day away."

"And you would use all of that spare time to do what? Masturbate?"

"Well, why not? Masturbation is fun. It's not like you satisfy me."

"Oh please, maybe I could if you didn't stick your dick in my eye."

"You are never going to let me live that down."

"No. You stuck your dick in my eye!"

"Pfff. Anyway, my point was that peasants a shit. One day I'll get my due for all the hard work I put in, and all those sue-happy scoundrels will get their just deserts for quibbling and faffing about. What do they do anyways, shovel dirt from one pile to another? I could do that. I'm going on a walk around the estates, I'll be back later."

"Don't let the wasps sting you. Also a bunch of knights errant showed up."

Great, just what he needed.

Gerfried turned around to make a witty retort but kept walking. It was an unwise decision because he smacked right into the door and fell over. His wife raised an eyebrow and smirked. He groaned, got up again, and ran right back into the door. Twice the door had bested him. This time he got up and threw the door open. It bounced back and slammed him in the face, knocking him over. He got up again and went through.

The door hit him again on his way out.

And yet the room refused to thaw, though the fire burned bright and eager. The air was stale, thick, and heavy. Achilles of Brandenburg paced back and forth, hand on his sword's pommel. The flickering fire gleamed off the bright silvery surface of his armor, distorted and warped by the various cuts, dings, and scratches. Good King Vladislaus the Dragon stared at his feet and smiled sheepishly. Man,

his feet were huge. Wow. So amazing. Such largeness. Philip was staring at the King, cold disgust and contempt mixed in his solemn eyes. Ernest was laying on his trunk, staring at the ceiling. Diether was tabulating figures and looking at his ledger. John swished his mug of beer around, stopping to sip from it or stare into it every few minutes. He hadn't always seen eye to eye with the Archbishop of Cologne, but harsh times made for odd bedfellows. Then there was Ruprecht. Ruprecht, Archbishop of Cologne. Even now, with rags instead of fine robes, and bags underneath his eyes, the sharp angles of his figure and hawkish glint of his eyes cut an imposing shadow over the room.

"So does anyone need anything? More beer? Bread? Cheese?" asked Vladislaus.

"No, your Majesty. Sit down," replied Ruprecht.

"We can marshal 40,000 men against the Kaiser. Of these, 10,000 are career soldiers and can equip themselves. We can supply munitions plate and basic armaments like swords, spears, and bows to another 10,000. That leaves us with... 20,000 men equipped with scraps. Useless. Perhaps even less than useless," said Philip.

"It's impossible! This is a thrice damned suicide mission!" growled Ernest.

"Patience, my friend. God will give us an answer. We are good and brave Christian men, we shall not falter," said Achilles.

"I would rather secure a victory first, and let God make it decisive, than stumble forward with the hope that God grants us victory. The cold truth of the matter is that the Kaiser outnumbers us three-to-one," said John.

"But we must fight. What other choice is there? Allow the Kaiser to do this and we open the doors to all of our dooms. He's setting a precedent for the wanton invasion and subjugation of vassals for the

flimsiest of pretexts. Diether, you most of all must understand," said Ruprecht.

"Of course I do," replied Diether.

Diether himself had been ousted, though he'd managed to affect his return. At this very moment, Ruprecht was in exile, his rightful office occupied by one he thought of as an anti-bishop. All three of the Archbishops were reformers, though they had different takes on the matter. The Emperor, in concert with the Pope, wanted desperately to shut them down.

"How are we supposed to fight this then? He's got more knights than we do equipped soldiers," said John.

No answer.

Snow White and Albert Florian were curiously absent from the scene. Ostensibly, the battle was being fought for them. But the scope of it was far beyond them. It was more than a simple eloping, more than a punishment for alleged kinslaying. It was the battle between reform and tradition, the battle between love and justice, the battle between crown and aristocracy, the battle between freedom and peace.

In a distant Pomeranian field in far away Poland, an old woman discovered an intriguing flower.

Rapunzel rubbed her eyes and groaned. Seven am, the usual morning lineup. She shuffled to the dining hall. She sat down, a feast already prepared for her. Eugene was already there, reading a newspaper and chewing on a biscuit.

"Morning, blondie," said Eugene.

"Hey Eugene," said Rapunzel. She yawned.

Bismarck shoved her a pile of papers. Rapunzel pulled out her stamp and pen. A servant placed a pitcher of coffee. Rapunzel took the pitcher and started chugging it down, reading the papers out of the corner of her eye and signing with her free hand. Over the course of her life, her coffee intake would gradually rise until it finally reached fifty cups per day, enough caffiene to literally kill lesser beings. Of course, the Kaiserin had always had the constitution of a ten oxes strapped to a strongman being benchpressed by Hercules.

"Alright, it's time to take on the day! Wooooo!" shouted Rapunzel.

"Hey blondie, calm down," said Eugene.

"Nope! Chancellor, show me the most urgent dispatches! Let me at 'em, I'll tear them apart," said the Kaiserin.

"As you will," replied Bismarck.

Little Eugene came dashing into the halls. He clambered onto a chair, then pulled himself up onto the table. He screamed and clapped, then ran down the table, scattering dishes and utensils everywhere. Servants scrambled to pick up the solid gold plates and gilded utensils, rushing them back to be cleaned. He stepped into a plate of caviar then squealed with delight, splashing around in the piled up fish eggs. With a flourish and bow, he stepped in front of his mother, standing on the table like some conquering warlord of old. He gave his mother the smoulder in miniature.

"MOOOOMMMMMMY. Mommy! Moooooommmmy. Mommy. Mommy. Mom. Mama. Mommy. Mom! Mommy! Mommy! Mommy. Mom. Mommy! Guess what?" asked little Eugene.

"What?" asked Rapunzel.

"I love you!"

"I love you too," said Rapunzel, ruffling his hair and pinching his cheeks.

"I love you more."

"I love you most."

"Yay!"

Eugene tried to place his greasy little fingers on the stack of papers, but Bismarck shoved him back. He tried again, and Bismarck pushed him back again. He stamped his foot on the table. Bismarck stared the little boy in the eyes.

"This is not some game for little boys," said Bismarck, sternness in his voice.

Little Eugene hissed back and glared.

"No hissing," said Rapunzel, wagging her finger at him.

Eugene frowned, then ran out of the room making raspberries and flapping his arms around. King Eugene sighed. That boy wasn't quite right. At his age, he was doing proper things. Stealing, tricking, lying, reading, orphanning. Yes, that was a verb now. He was the king, it could be a verb if he wanted it to be.

And Rapunzel thought back, thought back to the things that kept her up late at night. Her real parents never had time to tuck her in or read her stories. They never held her close and told her that they loved her most. Yes, they loved her, but it was different. And now they were gone too. She stared into the dark of her bedroom at night, and wondered. She was an adult now, but had she grown up? Had any of them really grown up?

I am the state.

And the state is me.

But though she could hold the world in her hands, in the silence of the long nights, who would hold her? Who would hug her and love her most? She would nuzzle against Eugene, hold him, feel his

breath puff hotly against her neck. But it was the embrace of a lover and a friend, not of a parent. And so it was. So it would be.

And little Eugene, exhausted by his revels, returned to his room to nap. He dreamed his little dreams. He dreamed of machine guns and trenches, of pillboxes and paratroopers. He dreamed of poison gas laid thick on the ground, a fog with killing force. He dreamed of Europe, nay, the world tangled up in his mother's hair.

One day it would all be his. It was his birthright, after all.

Michael looked at his drawing. Hmmm. It still needed something. Oh, that was it! Just a splotch of gray here, a dab of red there, a fucking muscular baby there (FUCK YEAH), an angry dolphin... perfect. And that's how Antioch looked except not at all. It was real pretty though, so accuracy be damned. The text was meant to be accurate, the pictures beautiful. Along with "THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT DICKS", which was a page completely covered in dicks, it was his masterpiece. It's not like anyone would be stupid enough to just look at the pictures and ignore the text. That would be absurd.

"Hey Thomas," said Michael.

"Hey Michael."

"Take a look at my picture. It's Antioch."

"Oh, neat. Why do the East Romans have a giant snail?"

"You remember Augustus? Yeah, you know, the thing. Last thing we got from him. I really liked it, so uhhh... reference. Neat, huh?"

"Oh yeah! Nice!"

"You know it!"

It was so nice that a bunch of other monks copied it. Later folks would look at it and be puzzled. Why wouldn't they be? It was a in-joke by a bunch of circlejerking monks that spread out of control. Still, as long as they read the words, they'd still understand.

"Play the music, Franz, the Imperial March," said Emperor Adalbert.

"All of your marches are imperial marches. You're the emperor. It makes your marches imperial," said Franz.

"You know the one though, the Imperial one. The most Imperial one. You know DUN DUN DUN DOO DUN DUN DOO DUN DUN."

"Yes milord."

The crowds parted for Adalbert Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman Emperor and Dark Lord of the Germans. Franz sighed internally. His master was humming the tune of the march himself. He let his mind wander as his body caught the pace of the march, mind and body lulled into monotonous harmony. Eventually, reality called him back. For some reason or another, the Emperor had stopped. He opened his eyes. Adalbert was staring slackjawed at a cat. Wonderful.

"Ahem. Emperor Adalbert?" said Franz.

"Hmm? What? Look at this kitty! Oooh, it's so fascinating. It's like a little person with cute fuzzy paws," said the Dark Lord of the Germans.

"Emperor Adalbert."

"KITTY KITTY PLAY WITH ME."

"You were marching?"

"Ah, yes. I was marching. Why was I marching?"

"Because you have a visitor."

"Oh, splendid! Who is it? A peasant? I do love the peasants, they're so folksy and down to earth. Or is it a Duke? Hmmmm... dukes. Sounds like some sort of tavern or something. The Dukes. The Drunk Dukes. Perhaps I should sponsor some troubadours, get some bards, call them the Drunk Dukes. Yes, that sounds like a plan."

"It's the Duke of Austria."

"I didn't know we had a Duke of Austerlitz."

"The Duke of Austria."

"The Duke of Leibowitz?"

"The Duke of Austria."

"The Dooku Count von Shmitz?"

"You're not even trying anymore."

"Oh, the Duke of Austria. Send him in."

Outside, the Duke of Austria was banging his head against the wall. He reached up and grabbed his head. A tuft of hair fell out. He screamed.

"Why is this happening to me?" said Frederick.

"Patience, Frederick. God works in mysterious ways," said Grimhilde.

"I'm glad he has such a mysterious plan! Meanwhile I have to deal with the consequences!"

"Calm down. It won't help to look so distraught in front of the Emperor."

"You're right, of course, you're right. Ha. Hahahahahaha! I just tore out my own hair! I. JUST. TORE. OUT. MY. HAIR."

"Frederick, get a hold of yourself."

"How am I supposed to get a hold of myself? My only daughter consorts with the devil, killed her own cousin, poisoned a village, and eloped with some Dukeling and is now plotting to overthrow the Empire! She's hellspawn! Skin as pale as bone, lips red as blood, hair dark as the purest night! God save me!"

"God save us all."

Frederick heard the servant call, and he walked inside the Great Hall.

"Greetings your Imperial Highness," said Frederick.

"Please... call me Donker Vader," said the Emperor as he steepled his fingers.

"Donker Vader?"

"It means ***Dark Father*** in Dutch."

"Right."

"What is your request?"

"My daughter has betrayed me. She is a kinslayer and a sorceress. She has taken refuge in Bavaria with her new husband. I need your help, my liege."

"Say no more. I exist to protect my subjects from the forces of evil! I'll even reimburse your expenses and donate the excess loot and ransom to charity. So sayeth me, and I'm the Emperor. I'm very important, y'know?"

"Thank you."

"You are dismissed."

The Duke departed. Grimhilde stayed. She approached the Emperor. He was busy staring at his own robes. How did they make them colorful? It was amazing.

"Emperor Adalbert?" asked Grimhilde.

"DONKER VADER!" replied the Emperor.

"Donker Vader... I have a few talents that you may be interested in. Special talents, strange talents."

"Are you hitting on me Mrs. Hapsburg?"

"No."

"Oh. Then what is it?"

"I can make you very powerful. Give you strange and useful advantages over your enemies."

"But I'm already very powerful. I'm the strongest man in Christendom. My crossbowmen can blot out the sun with their volleys, my knights are legion."

"But there are stranger things on Heaven and Earth."

"Indeed there are. I once saw a fish drown. That's really strange."

"No, I mean things of the supernatural sort."

"Isn't something super natural just extra natural? What's so great about that?"

"I'm magic."

"Do a card trick!"

"I'm a witch!"

[illegible]

The Emperor took a deep breath.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHhhhhhhhhhhHHHHHHHHHHHHhhhhHHHHhhhhh
h! Okay. A witch!"

"Yes, a witch. Do you want anything?"

"AHHHHHHHHhhhh... wait, want anything? Magic things?
Ooooooh, magic things! I want a giant snail!"

"A... a giant snail."

"Yes."

"You want a giant snail? Why on earth would you ever want a giant snail?"

"It's a powerful war animal of the ancient past! I saw it in a picture book!"

"Okay, but I could give you so much more. You could summon a horde of demons, raid with ghostly warriors, become invincible, fly!"

"Oh, okay. I want a glowy sword."

"A sword able to cleave through any armor?"

"That would be unfair and unchivalrous. Just make a glowy one. Make it make cool noises when I swing it. I want it to be... blue... no,

green... wait... RED! Yes, red."

"Are you sure you don't want anything else? I have great power. Our victory could be assured."

"Nah. Give me a giant snail and glowy sword."

"Are you sure...?"

"Are you questioning my will? I could have you hanged! I could pull all support! No witchy witch shennannigans, but yes to giant snail. Very yes."

Grimhilde frowned.

Gerfried breathed in the fresh spring air. It smelled like crap. That was quite literal, it smelled like manure. Those filthy peasants were so dirty they made the fields smell bad, and the fields were just dirt! He kept walking. There were cows here. Cows were such stupid animals. You could tip them over even. Unbelievable.

Gerfried reached up and plucked an apricot off a tree. He bit into it, the juice practically bursting out as the gentle skin ruptured beneath his penetrating teeth, the little golden gobbets of sweetness rolling down his chin before hitting the ground. He shuddered. Then he bit again. It was nice to have a snack while walking. Some people would say that this was gluttonous. He generally didn't listen to those people. They were stupid and probably smelled bad. Probably didn't bathe either. Absolutely disgusting.

He was getting closer to his shed. He enjoyed his shed, and his shed enjoyed him. It was his shed. What else would it be other than a shed?

There was noise coming from the shed. It sounded like moaning and grunting. Odd.

He kicked open the door. Inside were two people. One of them was a knight errant, the other a local peasant woman. The knight was on top of the peasant woman, and she was bruised and bloody. A few teeth had been knocked out of her, and she was whimpering. Her nude form was pinned by the knight's hold. How odd.

Wait a second. They were on top of his rug. It was a very nice rug! Now there were red and white stains all over it! It was from the mysterious Arabian lands! He had literally bled for that rug. It was rich, it was opulent, it was nice. It was COMFY. What gave this fucker the right to ruin a perfectly good rug? There was only one reasonable course of action.

"FUCK YOU," said Baron Gerfried as he plunged his sword into the knight errant's heart.

It would be very difficult to clean that rug up. Once again, the peasantry was wasting his goddamn time. The woman was staring, blank-eyed and slack-jawed. Gerfried groaned. Apparently she was senseless. Oh well, if she stayed there she'd just get the rug dirtier. He dumped the body outside then picked up the woman, hoisting her over his shoulder. She was crying. Eh, she'd get over it. Probably. What did he care? He didn't. Well, time to take her back to the castle.

"Why did this happen?" sobbed the woman.

"Because horny," said the Baron with a shrug. Shrugging was not particularly wise as he was carrying someone, and he quickly steadied himself and readjusted the balance of weight.

He was forgetting something very important. Fuck, what was it? Oh, for fuck's sake. He'd dropped his apricot. It was a tasty one too. Great. Who would it eat now? Ants, he guessed. Ants didn't need more fruit. Ants needed to be stomped. Perfectly good apricot lost to vermin. Hmmm. Something was off. Oh, that was it.

"Hey. Hey. Breathe. You're safe now," said the Baron.

He didn't even know her name. What would happen when he had to use it? Man, that would be awkward. It would make him feel so strange. Would he just point and shout "Hey you"? Then again, he hated asking people's names after a little bit of time had passed. It was always so weird. Like, seriously, you didn't know their name? Ugh. Did he remember to leave the laundry out to dry? Probably not.

"It was all so fast, I couldn't stop it. He was so strong, I just... I don't... maybe if I was better..." said the peasant.

"He'll never hurt you again," said Gerfried. Because the man was dead. He just killed him. He died like a pussy too. Didn't even try to fight while bleeding out. He resisted the urge to chuckle.

"Was it my fault?"

...

Jesus, what a stupid question. Of course it wasn't her fault. Dumb peasant bitch. One of these days he'd get a bishop over to teach them all how to logic.

"No, of course it wasn't your fault."

"What now?"

"Don't know, but I'm here for you."

It was literally his job to be here on the manor, at least during the times he wasn't off killing people. But he figured it would be nice to explain the obvious. He really would have to complain to his lord about this. Such gross misconduct. Huh. Guess that made him the whiny peasant to his lord. Life really was just peasants all the way up and all the way down. It was funny like that.

He opened the door. His wife was there, waiting. They silently nodded at each other. Wow, this must look incredibly weird. Ah well. Can't be helped now.

"Servants? Bathe her and get her fresh clothes," ordered Gerfried.

Then he and his wife got some bread and ate a light meal.

"The messenger came while you were gone. The Duke is marshalling his forces. You leave at dawn next Thursday," said Sieglinde.

"I see. Some fool dustup with an overeager count?" asked Gerfried.

"No. Whatever it is, it's big. Expect all sorts, he said. We're crossing the Rubicon, he said. Our good Bavarian master might be rebelling against the Emperor."

"Ah hell."

"Who was she?"

"Some peasant girl."

"Will she be okay?"

"I think so. She's strong."

"Will you be safe out there?"

"Always am. You remember how we met? You remember the serenades, the dancing, the love ballads, the gentleness?"

"And then you socked him in the face."

"And I beat the shit out of him. Told him that his singing and dancing sucked. And then I beat the shit out of all his friends too. And all their friends. I'm a fighter. Can't get me down."

"Heh."

"I did it all for you, my little poison apple."

"What a charmer you are."

"I try."

The seven electors were still locked in deep thought when Snow White opened the door.

She knew a way to help.

These men were powerful. They had schemes. But at that very moment, they were at the ends of their ropes. Thus, they listened. The fate of the rebels was decided on that night.

Every so often, Tsar Alexander liked to remind Rapunzel of the plan. But the situation was not ripe for it. A full-scale invasion of Austria and the Ottoman Empire would no doubt draw unwanted attention from the other Powers. France across the border was eager to steal clay. Rapunzel was well aware of its steady growth over the course of history, how it had slowly accumulated territory through war. War was a French business, and business was good. Best to focus on industrial growth and the replenishment of manpower, which, after all, had been hard hit in the Napoleonic Wars.

When she was finally ready, Russia was not. Russia had managed to lop off a significant portion of the Ottoman Empire in the peace following the Napoleonic Wars, and it would be a lovely staging ground. The French and Italians were now allies, ready to march with Corona's armies. The Spanish and Portuguese had been cowed, and at any rate, were busy with their own affairs. The British would not lift a hand against them without allies. The time was right to finally make good the Greek Plan. Byzantium would live again. But the Russian Tsars after Alexander had no stomach for it.

So the plan died.

It had been a few days since the incident. Gerfried was whistling and organizing his spice rack. The peasant woman walked in. Brunhilde, that was her name.

"Lord Gerfried?" she asked.

"Yes?" replied Gerfried.

"I don't know what to do now."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

"I can't go back, can I?"

"Sure you can. Do you want to go back?"

"Not really."

"Okay."

"I can't stay in the castle, can I?"

"You can stay in the castle. It's built to house people in times of crisis, after all."

"But I don't really want to do that either. I guess what I really want is something very different. A fresh place, something I've never seen before, good or bad. I don't know. Am I being crazy?"

"Do you want to come with me?"

"I guess I do."

"Alright. Old Tom Lassie fell down a well, so I'm short one on my levy. Bavaria buddy probably won't check, but I do have a spot. There's spare plate and swords in the armory, I'll show you."

After his trip to the armory, he went down to his daughter's bedroom. They mock fenced for half an hour, then he tucked her in and read

her a bedtime story.

She asked a question.

"Daddy... I know life is hard, but I'm trying my best," said little Freya.

"I'm very proud of you for it," said Gerfried.

"I know you wish I was born a boy."

Gerfried paused.

"Why would you ever say that?" asked Gerfried.

"Because... I can't inherit the manor when you die. It's against the code."

"Don't you ever think that, okay? You're great just the way you are."

"But what about the laws?"

"Fuck the laws. Laws are for lawsuit happy peasants. I'll change the laws. I'll find a way, I promise. You're my little angel, and there's nothing that will ever change that, got it?"

Baron Gerfried reviewed his ledgers for a few hours, then went to sleep. He dreamed of marbles.

His hand was ready to open the door, but his mind was not. He traced the thin lines of the grain up and down, sniffed in the smell of the wood. He started to open it, then stopped again. Georg poked him a few times with the butt of his pike. Maximilian grumbled. Of course Georg was right, there was nothing to fear. He ignored the cloying thickness forming in his throat, the constricting grip rapidly tightening around his chest. It was all just jitters. Nothing to worry about. He opened the door and walked in.

The Duke of Bavaria and Snow White were tending a potted plant. Maximilian cleared his throat and puffed up his chest. Right, this was it.

"Snow White?" asked Maximilian.

"Hello!" said Snow White.

He optically canvassed his sister, this girl which his shimmering orbs had not glanced upon since the springtime of youth, when he was but a boy and she but a babe, the idealistic world protean and abounding with a plethora of panaceas, no matter what obstreperous quarrel the day might bring. A rabble of butterflies took wing in his chest when first he sighted her ruby red embouchment, glistening with the freshness of youth, exhilarating his fancy and causing his heart to flutter, the vacillation of it like the pounding drums of savage surreptitious tribes in ribald jungles, riling up their natural pugnaciousness. The perky peaks of the albinic alpine projections of her chestflesh enticed him, sure as he was of their being firm enough to arouse his passion, yet soft enough to fondle, the winsome ancient pyramids to which venerable old civilizations might dedicate their infinite labors to, mounds full of torpid revellers exhausted by the endless ecstatic bacchanalia to which she had driven them, and he was almost driven to a pseudo-solipsistic fervor by their grace, excepting that it was she and not he which was the sole matter of that obdurate universe. The pale white of her skin was like snowflakes on a brumal day, a field of wintry white unmatched even by those which entombed fertile fields of the Scandinavian countryside, the brumality of a snowcloud streaked sky showering flakes of pale white was not peer for the achromacity of her skin, a licentious invective against dithering moral codes that had previously bound him, a harangue against his inchoate but fastidious codes, an extolling of the goddess that now stood before him. Hair dark as anthracitic jet - fit for a forge furnace, framed her impeccably proportioned face, and truly did it feed a fire within him. Calumny, it was, calumny against the self! If only he could adumbrate all the florid reasons he admired that sensuous form, perhaps he could

exculpate himself and the inimically insidious urges that now gripped him, that fractious execrable specter that now possessed his jubilant form and drove him to garrulous grandiloquence! Oh, those fecund hips guarding those ephemerally ebullient pallid gates. How purile he was, yet he could not but succumb to those spurious desires. Ah yes, turpitude, how he fell to it, spitting vapid lust at the sacrosanct! She was sultry. She was pulchritudinous. She was his sister!

What the fuck was wrong with him? For that matter, why did he have such a large vocabulary? Probably all of the books.

"Ummm, hi. I'm... uhhh... urrr... hello. I'm Max. Maximilian! Yes, that's me! BROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOTHER," said Maximilian.

"Oh yes! I don't think we've seen each other since, well, I suppose ever. So it's nice to meet you, Max! How do you do?"

"Good! Great! Fantastic! Good!"

"Hello Maximilian. I am Albert Florian. I'm pleased to meet you! Your sister really is something else," said the Bavarian Duke.

"Yes, she is! Super cool!" replied Maximilian.

"Have you come with news from father? Oh, he seems so upset, but he won't listen to any of my messengers. I'm dreadfully sorry for causing him such grief. If only we could solve this all peacefully! It's always so terrible when people get hurt, and I'm sure that we could resolve this whole affair if we just talked a little. Heaven have mercy!" said Snow White with a tiny swoon.

"Indeed. We must always strive towards nobility, peace, and honor in our actions! Such is the righteous way," said Albert Florian.

There was an awkward bulge growing in his pants. He shuffled limply to the side, concealing it beneath the table. He mumbled something. A song was playing, but he couldn't pay attention to it.

Apparently it was something about justice and mercy, something about peace and harmony between all people. It sounded absolutely lovely, but it didn't help with his woes. If anything, it made them worse. His sister had to have a wonderful singing voice, didn't she? His dick was thumping up against the table, though luckily the sound was drowning out by the singing. Why boner, why? He was crying, but he wasn't sure if it was the music or the boner.

Suddenly, the song ended, and both the Duke of Bavaria and Snow White looked longingly into each other's eyes. Maximilian knew this was his last chance. He started frantically punching his dick. Snow White turned to look at him.

"Will you help me, brother?" asked Snow White.

"Yes, ARGH, yes, I will help you! My wiiii-haaaaiiii-ffeeeeuuuuhhh... my wife has vast estits... estates! ARGH! The forces of Burgundy are mightARGH indeed. It's clear to me now that FATHARGHHHHH has forsaken his claim on Austria with his pernicious actiARGHS and therefore it is mine by RIARGHT. Rest assured, I will do everythARGH in my power to help you," said Maximilian.

"Are you okay?" asked Snow White.

"Yes, of course! I'm off to go prune my cat!" shouted Maximilian.

He then brought his cape up dramatically, in the process shielding his boner, and backed out of the room.

"Hey Georg?" said Maximilian.

"Yeah?" said Georg.

"We're going back to Burgundy right now, and we're going to raise an army right now. Immediately. Let's go," said Maximilian.

"You seem to have committed yourself quickly," said Georg.

"Yes, for the pureness and virtue of my sister is so great that it is impossible for her to be villainous. Only the most wicked and dastardly of wretches could deny it. Now let's go!"

Each of the seven electors had seen many strange and powerful people. However, the seven gathered before them were unlike anything any of them had ever witnessed before.

They were dwarves. Actual, real life dwarves.

The Archbishop of Cologne coughed.

"I knew we couldn't keep her safe forever, but we still tried," said their leader. "T'aint nothing to be done 'bout it now."

He sighed and rifled through his pockets.

"Ah, here it is," said Doc as he retrieved his prize.

It was blue as a cat's eye, and, though small compared to them, it was still the largest diamond any of them had ever seen. Indeed, though they didn't know it, it was one of the largest diamonds in the world.

"When I saw her ride off into the sunset, I figured she'd earned her happy ending. Guess it wasn't so easy after all," said Doc as he handed over the gem.

John inspected it.

"This is the largest gemstone I've ever seen! Does it have a name?" said John.

"I suppose you can call it Hope. Hope's what Snow White gave us, and hopefully Hope's what that gem will give you. Hope for a happy ending and a fighting chance," said Doc.

"Is there I can ever do to repay you?" asked Duke Albert.

"Just make sure Snow White is happy, okay? That's all I ask, and that's all I need."

The gem was hastily sold to a Frenchman, the electors claiming the source as some Indian mine. No further questions were asked-one did not simply turn down a gem of this size, quality, and beauty. With that, they suddenly had a king's fortune.

With that money, they hired mercenaries and hired scores of men. That wealth was the ability to build an army, an army that could rival the Emperor's. Sellswords and spare sons flooded in from across the continent. Even at the time, the coming battle was being heralded as the stuff of legends. It was to be climatic, it would decide things, though the decided things were unclear. Somehow, though they knew not why, all felt it was the end of an era.

The Kaiser's army was full to the brim with knights. Not only that, even with their reinforcements, the rebels were still outnumbered 1.5 to 1.

Tactical options were weighed. Maximilian suggested a hit-and-run strategy, waging indirect war until the Kaiser's men were worn down and the levy portion of his army had to go home. However, Georg argued that such a victory would be seen as dishonorable and illegitimate, and he personally disliked to win such an engagement in that manner anyways. If they were to achieve a triumphant and decisive victory, it would be done by fighting like men, openly, honestly, and directly. They had to outmatch the Emperor's quantity with quality, but the Emperor's quality was also high. A vast swath of his men were professionals, and, of course, many of them were knights.

What Georg did would make him the stuff of legends. They would sing his name in meadhouses from Tannenberg to Timbuktu, from Alsace to Ahvaz. Very soon, his enemies would see his point.

That was quite literal.

Elsa's stomach grumbled. She took one last sip of tea, then stood up. There would be dried spaghetti in the storage closet.

She opened the door. Kristoff was there, wearing a frilly dress, his arms and legs bound with rope. Anna was wearing antique plate armor, a fur-covered helmet, and fake vampire fangs. She was surrounded by life-size dolls of babies covered in fake blood. At least, Elsa hoped it was fake blood. This scene was probably a fitting metaphor for her entire life.

"Hi Kristoff," said Elsa.

"Hi Elsa," said Kristoff.

"Alack, Joan! Yarr, it be some strange visitor, matey! Perhaps the perfidious English! Quickly, to the Pariscave!" shouted Anna.

Ah, there was the spaghetti. Elsa reached into closet and pulled out the box, wiping off the semen encrusting it. Time to have lunch.

The sun rose over Bad Gandersheim.

Baron Gerfried reported in.

"First name?" asked the man.

"Gerfried," said the Baron.

"Last name?"

"Gerfried."

"Your last name is Gerfried?"

"My name is Gerfried von Gerfried. My parents were not creative people."

"Right then."

Some soldiers were standing around an upside-down pig, slapping its ass. They were laughing hysterically. One of them got kicked in the face, sending him flying into the muck. The rest laughed even harder, and several of them fell to the ground, clutching at their sides.

Maximilian, who was now claiming the rank of Duke of Austria in pretense, had told his men to wear clothing they were willing to die in. Naturally, most of them had chosen their most ridiculous and garish outfits, and if not for the armor they were also wearing, one would have thought it a particularly bawdy carnival or perhaps a pride parade. Gerfried bought a turnip from a turnip salesman and took a bite. It was a terrible turnip. Oh well, food was food. He passed by another two soldiers. They were both holding hens while rhythmically thrusting their codpieces. Gerfried looked at the codpieces. He really had to get one for himself. Yes, he would be the Dickmaster. No, Baron Dickmaster. It had a certain noble sound to it, didn't it? Baron Dickmaster.

An old woman poked him in the face. How disrespectful. She pointed down. Apparently he had wandered into her washing tub. Well, how about that?

He had a full harness, but others were not so lucky. Many only had half-harnesses, or worse, only breastplates. A few poor unfortunate souls only had their ridiculous costumes. At least almost everyone had head protection. He spied quite a few helmets being held snug under poofy, feathery hats.

The horns blared. War was upon them.

The battle began with both sides volleying at each other. Combat began in earnest when elements of the rebel heavy infantry encountered Imperial sword and buckler men. More men from each side were committed as the fight turned into a brawl.

Georg had an interesting life. He was the youngest of six sons, but his parents had always wanted more. Unfortunately, his mother was growing increasingly ill even at the time of his birth. Before she died, she wanted one son named Georg-it was such a pretty name. So the baby was named Georg. Georg did not expect to inherit, so he went off to the wider world to seek his fortune. Eventually, his travels brought him to Burgundy. It was there he met the young future Emperor and Duke of Austria, and though they were both mere boys, they would become fast friends. The fates had conspired to bring them together. A distant cousin saw that Burgundy lacked a male heir, and figuring the time was right, decided to strike. The war was short and uneventful, with the cousin's armies meeting a swift defeat, but it accomplished two very important things.

Firstly, Georg would save Maximilian's life, a debt that Maximilian would forever claim was unpaid, despite the ever larger favors granted to his friend. Secondly, Georg would see the work of the Swiss firsthand. While the other mercenaries broke and ran, the Swiss held and even pushed forward into their lines, inflicting some casualties before they finally routed, their allies all having long since left the field.

There was something to be said for that model of warfare.

As the melee enlarged, Maximilian committed his forces, pulling them out of reserve. With shock, the Imperials watched the rebel pikes advancing, and advancing with a furious vigor. The pikes pushed into the fray, and the enemy infantry noted, with dismay, that their attempts to close to melee were thwarted by the steel wall in front of them, an unbreakable front of pikes. There was no retreat-the path backwards was blocked by the press and mass of bodies. There was no advance, for in front was an impenetrable foe. They were crushed by the advancing glacier. Maximilian's pikes had punched straight through the enemy lines.

The Emperor sent his own pikes forward to try and stop Maximilian's. The two lines slammed into each other, many in the front ranks of both sides dying instantly, their armor failing at the force of the

blows. Others lived but were simply trampled to death by foe and comrade. The rest were now caught in a jostling, thick mass of bodies, both sides pressing and pushing to gain an advantage. The Imperial pikes failed for a moment, and a moment was all it took. Out came the shouts and cries. Double pay men, to the front! Halberdiers and zweihander men streamed into the breach, swinging wildly, their frenetic slashing further disordering the enemy and widening the breach. The enemy formation became undone, as men scrambled to get away from the scything strikes of the swords and the oncoming wall of armored pikemen.

Meanwhile, the Imperial forces attempted to gain the upper hand by attacking the right flank of the rebel forces. A force of light cavalry, knights, and heavy infantry came charging from prepared hidden positions in the woods by Bad Gandersheim. Many of the rebel forces simply broke when they saw the wave of men pouring towards them. As others saw their allies flee, they broke as well. Soon, fear was gripping units up and down the entire right flank, and the rout threatened to spread to the center too, where the Burgundian pikes were winning the battle.

Then a woman spoke. Her old life was at an end, she said. All of its edifices had been swept away. Any semblance of normality had been shocked away by the past few weeks. No matter what happened, the world after this battle would be different. It would be a new world, and they would have new lives. Whether it be in the mortal plane or in heaven, they would be reborn. Would it be fitting to begin their new lives with cowardice? Would it be right to flee and let the first day of their new lives be one of defeat and misery? They were to be reborn, and they ought to be reborn in glory. Then she took up a fallen standard and moved to the front rank.

Then the horses came. Though the impact of half a ton of horseflesh was powerful and strong, and though many perished from the sheer force of such a blow, others stood. The horses wheeled around again, and went for another charge. The steel of their armor was

strong, but their wills were even stronger, and the second charge still did not send them to rout. Then a third charge came.

The fate of the shieldmaiden has been lost to time. Some tellings say that she perished in those fields, lost in the dirt made mud by the blood and sweat of fighting men. Other tellings claim that she forsook an ordinary life after that and joined a convent. Still others claim that she returned home to start a family. And others say that she found love in that warrior's band, joining her husband on mercenary adventures across Europe. But no matter what her fate, the line held. The line held and the world watched it hold. One by one, the scattering rebels rallied and drove the attacking Imperial forces back.

Time was running out. The Burgundian pikes had to be defeated before they drove the Imperial army into the river and drowned them all. The rebel army drew nearer and nearer to the Imperial reserves at Orxhausen. It was time for a great charge.

The knights of the realm assembled on the ridge near Orxhausen, and they charged downhill, the speed and power of their warhorses made greater by the downward motion. The pikemen braced themselves.

Horses drove themselves into spears, the shuddering bodies tossing men into the air and crushing victims even as life bled out of them. Knights were hurled forward into crowds, tossed onto the earth and trampled, or simply pincushioned by pikes. The stench of dying men was overwhelming as wave after wave fell onto the pikes to no avail. Great mounds of carrion meat formed as the assault dragged on. In only thirty minutes, ten thousand men had died. Swords sprouted from the earth like forest trees, corpses littered the ground. Broken pikes lay around broken men, armor as dented as the bodies inside. In that charge, both sides had suffered. But the knights had suffered far more. Chivalry was dead. With that charge, the legend of the knight had sallied forth, only to be impaled. The legend of the landsknecht was its killer, and now it stood triumphant.

Baron Gerfried stood with other heavy cavalry. As the enemy infantry shattered, they moved in to run the enemy down. Group after group of men was cut down by their swords or smashed beneath the hooves of their horses. And as the enemy was reaped, Gerfried spied a peculiar figure in the distance. The Emperor had urged his giant snail forward early in the fight, but owing to its slow speed, it had not gone very far. Still, it was bold, continuing to slither forward even as the army around it dissolved. Gerfried charged towards it.

On the Imperial right flank, Grimhilde watched the scene with dismay. She should have ignored the Emperor's demands and woven a spell to win the battle from the outset. Still, there was still time. She began to work her magic. She concentrated hard on it. Thus, it was no surprise that she failed to notice the onrushing army. First came a volley from heavy horse archers. She was knocked to the ground by the impact, but magical wards woven into her clothing had absorbed most of the force. Her compatriots were not so lucky, and many of them were now dead or incapacitated by injury. She got up, dusted herself off, and then promptly had her head lopped off by a charging horseman. The horseman's name was Captain Jetmir Dreshaj, and it was a habit of his to collect heads as trophies. This one would be the most prized in his collection.

As his horse drew close to the snail, Gerfried jumped off, landing on the shell and scrambling up to the snail's back. The Emperor was waiting for him there. The Emperor did a lot of things. He fished. He looked at cats. He loved to hug people, indeed, he would hug anyone that asked, and oftentimes he would hug anyone that simply looked sad or frustrated. He did administrative work, if administrative work was defined as the delegation of administrative work. He loved listening to and telling jokes. He did not fight. He had people for that. Still, he was not afraid. Long ago, the monks of the Eternal City had prophesized to his illustrious forebear, Conradin the Invincible, that no Hohenstaufen Emperor would ever be felled by mortal blade.

Emperor Adalbert charged at him, swinging wildly. Gerfried ducked to the side and placed his free hand halfway down his blade,

retaliating with a series of quick thrusts. Adalbert responded by swinging again, a wide arcing swing. Gerfried threw his shoulder against the king's sword, trusting his armor to shield against the blow. It did. He twisted and the Emperor lost his grip. The sword went flying, landing in some muck. With a single fluid motion, Gerfried flipped his sword around. He began to hammer the Emperor using the crossguard. The poor man rattled and shook inside his armor, and he began to misstep and sway about in his confusion. Seeing his chance, Gerfried gave the Emperor a good kick to the chest, and he fell over. Now Gerfried redoubled his hammering, making sure that the man could not return to his senses and get up again. He smashed at the helmet, making the Emperor's head swim as the cage around it convulsed. Finally, sufficiently convinced that his foe was addled beyond repair, Gerfried drove his sword through the armpit of the Emperor's armor, killing him, then decapitated the corpse for good measure. He spied a barrel of salt on the snail's back, kept there for who knows what reason, and broke it open. The snail dissolved. Satisfied, he took the Emperor's crown, jumped off the snail, and returned to his comrades.

Later, he would try to find a reason why the prophecy had failed. Eventually he rationalized that the killing blades were not mortal, as the rebel army had been funded by dwarves. In truth, the prophecy was a sham made up by a few drunken monks in order to curry a future Emperor's favor, and it had only lasted so long through sheer dumb luck. For his service, Maximilian would offer Gerfried a favor. His request was simple. All he wanted for his daughter to inherit in peace. Maximilian, who would spend much of his early reign dealing with Burgundian troubles, understood the feeling. Gerfried's wish was granted.

Their Emperor dead, the remaining Imperial forces shattered, fleeing the field as fast as their legs could carry them.

To be certain, the numbers had been inflated. Disease, desertion, and tardiness stripped away some. Furthermore, much of those numbers had never existed in the first place, the product of various

exaggerations by nobles seeking higher status and tale-spinning soldiers alike. In truth, there had probably only been 60,000 Imperials and 38,000 rebels. Still, it had been one of the largest battles in Medieval history. The day had begun in the Medieval era. By nightfall, that era was dead. The Renaissance rose with the sun the next day.

The seven electors convened, having won the day. In defiance of the pope, confident in their own authority, they unanimously declared Maximilian Holy Roman Emperor, and crowned him on the spot. He swore to protect the faith. He swore to protect the church. He swore to protect the law. He swore to protect the weak and downtrodden. Finally, he added his own oath. The rebels had fought against an overreach and abuse of power by Emperor Adalbert. Maximilian swore that he would protect the rights of his vassals and the autonomy of the German states. So did he swear it, so it was done. Maximilian thus became Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor.

True to his word, he let his vassals be. He would reform the Empire, removing the obligation to be crowned by the pope, making clear all obligations owed to the Emperor and all responsibilities borne by it, and restricting its power. The Empire would continue in that state until it was obsoleted by the two German confederations and finally replaced by Austro-Germany. Soon, he found himself embroiled in other affairs. A messenger came, bearing good news and bad news. The good news was that his wife had given him a son. The bad news? The French had seized the opportunity presented by the absence of Burgundian soldiers, and had annexed the Burgundian lands. So he went on campaign, this time with all the power of the Empire behind him, and secured Burgundy. Then the Swiss went into revolt, and he marched on Switzerland. After years of fighting, he finally yielded and allowed them independence. He betrothed his son to the Spanish heiress, securing Spain for his line. Then it was north again, to suppress Dutch revolts. After that, there was a decade of relative peace, as Maximilian turned to the establishment of universities and churches, eager to spread learning across the land. He spent much of these years studying his own personal

prayer book, talking with the clergy, and improving the efficiency of his land's administration. This peace would not last forever. The Hungarian nobility had been very pleased by the weak rule of Vladislaus II, and at his death, they decided to keep a good thing going. They chose the weakest man they could find as their next king. Unfortunately for them, this now placed them outside Maximilian's sphere. It would be a fatal mistake. For the next two years, German landsknechts streamed into Hungary, winning battle after battle. Finally, humbled and defeated, the Hungarian nobles agreed to designate Maximilian or his heir as the next king of Hungary. Satisfied, Maximilian withdrew. At this point, domestic concerns settled and foreign interests locked down, he recalled the Archbishops that had supported his rise to power so many years before. He raised an army, the Great Reformer Army, and made ready to march on Rome. The Church was corrupt. To be certain, the monks of the past had not always lived up to the Christian ideal. But still, they had earnestly kept the faith and vigorously pursued knowledge. Now, however, popes actively sought and used temporal power, and sin abounded. Indulgences were dispensed like candy. Again, this was not unheard of in the past. Unfortunately, even the peasants were now noticing something was wrong. If the Church was to be saved, the Church had to be purged. Maximilian would make the Pope bend his knee. It was to be Maximilian's last campaign. On the road to Rome, he suddenly dismounted, sat down, closed his eyes, and died.

The Great Reformer Army retreated back to Austria, its mission incomplete. Perhaps if it had succeeded, the coming turmoil could have been avoided. At the very least, the world would look quite different. Maximilian had spread the Empire's influence far and wide, securing its borders and vanquishing its enemies. Learning and the arts were now coming into bloom. All agreed that his reign had been restrained yet forceful. With that in mind, how could they do anything but elect another Hapsburg? One dynasty had fallen. The Hapsburgs now rose.

Fair is not only a word for beauty. Fair also speaks of justice. Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

The mirror was silent.

Soon enough, an answer would be given. For now, there was only the sound of Latin hammering on a Wittenburg church door, the rustling of paper in an autumn wind.

Author Notes: Special thanks to GipsyDanger and very special thanks to Eroticist for their contributions to the purple prose paragraph in the Snow White/Maximilian meeting section. I couldn't have finished this chapter without them, which I mean, they wrote that while I watched.

Overpower

Exasperation was like a train and there was no getting off that wild ride for Queen Elsa.

Much like a train, it went into the tunnel, pulled into the station, pulled back out of the station, went back into the tunnel, left the tunnel, went back in the tunnel, pulled into the station, and returned to the tunnel. Like a clumsy train metaphor, it was constantly being inserted and reinserted. Much like a train, the conductor (which would be Elsa) was greasy with lubricant and old butter.

I may or may not understand how trains work. Trains are hard and confusing.

Much like a penis! Ha! Full circle, baby!

It had started with Elsa catching word of a cult forming. Being a good Lutheran (and incidentally head of the Church), she had to go investigate. It was a journey that would take her to the outskirts of an increasingly sprawling Bergen. The city had absorbed the lion's share of national population growth, a mixed blessing. The city was riding the wave of a new era of industrialism, one dominated by chemicals and smokestacks.

At Elsa's coronation, Arendelle had a population of 5,000 and Bergen had 28,000 for a total of 33,000 in what were, at least officially, two different townships. Merely twenty years later, both Old Bergen and Arendelle District had been reduced to neighborhoods in a Bergen metropolitan region with 150,000 souls in residence. When Elsa died, the city had reached a total of 435,000 inhabitants. By the time of the Communist uprising, Bergen had over 1.1 million people.

And there was nowhere to put these teeming masses, so they spread out across the land, growing and attaching onto Bergen like a fleshy tumor. Housing could not possibly keep up with such

astronomical growth. Infrastructure had to be extended. It could not grow enough fast enough. Faced with homelessness, the downtrodden masses took matters into their own hands. Shanties and huts sprang up around the city proper. Rain practically fell through the thin wood, cardboard, and sheet metal construction, cold pierced it like tissue. Street urchins ran through the twisting labyrinths of the slums, their naked bodies clothed by caked filth and vermin, frail forms cloaked by clouds of midges born and bred by the pools of stagnant muck and human waste littering the slums, their rusty nail mouths stuck in lockjaw grins.

The poor living there could ill afford the same kind of lung protection the rich had. Many an autopsy of the slumfolk would reveal blackened, charred lumps of flesh where lungs ought to be. The air, far from giving life, was choking it out of them.

In such wretched conditions, crime flourished. The slums were hardly legal, spilling over into private property and disregarding proper construction rules and standards. They were erected hastily and often fell apart in the slightest of storms. Every winter would see hundreds frozen to death, their shoddy homes converted into makeshift tombs. Few had the stomach to clear corpses out of the outskirts, and at any rate, it was not always easy to tell the living from the dead. The dead rotted there, the wasted inhabitants afraid to disturb them. Trash overflowed into the streets, a mixture of human detritus and broken dreams. The slumlords ruled over these pale kingdoms, their extortionists keeping the ignorant masses in line, a version of monarchy in miniature. Afraid and confused, they paid the slumlord tolls, unknowing that this did not give ownership or protection. The Secret Police could not purge the unwanted fast enough, and the constabulary was plagued by low morale, desertion, and underpatrol. Even the slumlords themselves were miserable. In a kinder time, some would be called peaceniks. Many hailed from Corona, driven out by its militaristic cultural values and martial law. They wanted change, had preached change. In the slums of Arendelle were their fellow downtrodden, the sympathetic. It was a place to find a fresh start and build a power base. But the building

was tough and order hard to maintain. At the end of it, they looked at their realm and saw a kingdom of the damned, and they were damned most of all. Though the English would introduce the revolutionary new idea of a professional and trained police force, the idea would not spread to Arendelle until 1874. Until then, the underworld festered. Such were the miserable lots of the destitute.

After all, it was better than the alternative. Even life here, life amongst human and animal vermin, life in filth and squalor, even this was better than death. It was better than a slow wasting death with clawing hunger slowly tearing the body apart as thirst shattered the mind and decayed the flesh. For the first time in forever, Arendelle was experiencing prosperity and wealth. This was the face of it. Though the people lived in hovels, they lived. They ate. They had been saved from disease. Many of them existed, were given life because of the great wealth Arendelle was gaining. So the cities continued to grow and the slums expanded. The country had little arable land to begin with, and it had never been enough even in the old days. The steamers came in, their exhausts cutting tar-black scars in the skies, the wakes of their bows churning through the bloated corpses of unfortunates floating in the bay. It was in these places that Hobbes's hoary old wisdom of the human condition being nasty and brutish, and Malthus's accusation of population collapse and misery rang at least a little true.

This was the ground in which any wild cult could gain traction so long as it promised hope.

In time, as decades known as the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s rolled around again, the slums would fade away and eventually die. The shamed former elite of Norway would break their backs in the Cultural Revolution, their bones laying the foundations of innumerable drab gray commieblocks. Across the sea, British pencil pushers would eventually push over the old shanties and replace them with quaint, cozy country homes. The French Third Republic would rise from the ashes of World War II, making reconstruction one of its first acts. And so they would forget, the images fading from

memory as all unpleasant but ordinary things do, until the notion of slums in Europe became laughable. So they laughed at others. They laughed at the monkey-men squirming and dancing in the Sao Paulo favelas, parasites worming their way through the food and water to settle little colonies in the guts of the hapless many. They laughed at the Varanasi men bathing alongside the Ganges dead as their Islamic overlords looked on, the rotting legacy of Maldonia still hanging fetid in the air. Still, they laughed uneasily, for in their hearts of hearts they knew.

In the words of old Marlow, this too had been one of the dark places of the Earth.

Anna was standing in the crowd. On the one hand, it was worrying that Anna was there. On the other, it was nice that there was a familiar face. Anna was staring glassy-eyed at the cult leader. Disturbing. Was he really so entrancing? Elsa tapped Anna on the shoulder. No response. Elsa tapped again. Elsa shook her sister, and finally Anna responded. Anna yawned, grinned, and gave a thumbs up. Elsa raised an eyebrow.

"Anna? Are you okay?" asked Elsa.

"Oh, yeah, sure! Just taking a little nap, is all!" said Anna.

"A nap right here? How? Why?"

"It's easy. I just close my eyes until they're open and sleep standing up with my eyes open."

"That doesn't make any sense at all."

Anna shrugged.

"So what brings you out to the Maze of Agony?" asked Anna.

"That's what they call this place?!"

"Well, not all of it, just this part. There's also the Burnt Thaler, the Fives, Puke Alley, the Field of Razors, Suicide Street, Partyville, Strumpet Orchard, Piss Town, Hoboton, Drinker's Hamlet, you know... et cetera, et cetera, the usual spots."

"Good lord."

"That's on the other side of Bergen."

"What? Oh, nevermind. I'm looking for a cult."

"Which one?"

"..."

"Oh, I'm just ribbing you. I'm pretty sure I know which one. This way!"

Down the slippery roads they went, passing by the dismal shacks, the dull gray eyes of the wood watching as they passed. Finally, they came to yet another crowd, the shiftless eyeless mass roiling with activity.

At a distant pulpit was a man wearing clown shoes and a big red nose, bubble wand in hand.

He lifted his arms into the air and shouted, "If anyone doubts the word of the Great Clean One, let them speak now and test their might against His!"

"I challenge the Great Clean One," said Elsa.

The preacher scoffed.

"THEN WITNESS TRUE POWER!" he said, lifting his wand and twirling it about.

He made a man-sized bubble. The crowd oohed and ahed. Then he twirled it around again and made a bubble shaped like a duck. A

woman climbed up onto the stage and began convulsing and speaking in tongues.

The crowd was in awe of soap bubbles.

Soap. Bubbles.

This was ridiculous.

"Attention everyone. All this man is doing is making soap bubbles," said Elsa.

"He made me not smell bad!" "He cleaned my cat!" "My dishes are fixed now!" "They're so huge and glowy!"

"He's just blowing bubbles. Anyone can do it. We understand the mechanisms behind it. Soap binds both to lipids and to water, and the bubble forms in order to maximize volume given fixed surfa-"

"Witch! Magic incantations!"

"Heretic! Non-believer! I show my works and yet she still is not convinced by their majesty?" shouted the preacher.

"It's just soap!" shouted Elsa as she stamped her foot on the ground.

Wait. That was it!

"What sort of powers do you have then, heretic?" asked the preacher.

Elsa smiled knowingly and waved her hands. Then she stomped on the ground. She watched as the snow flurried upwards, crystallizing into a variety of forms. The slums were being covered in a variety of frosty patterns. They almost looked presentable. Elsa looked back to the crowd.

They were decidedly unimpressed.

"Oh gee, snow. Not like there's snow everywhere."

"Wow, making it cold. The Great Clean One is way more helpful."

"The Great Clean One cleaned my cat. You probably froze him to death."

Elsa scowled.

"Besides, if you're magic, that just proves that the Great Clean One is magic too! It just shows that it's a magical world and there's magic all around us!"

"No, it doesn't. If I found a yeti in the mountains, would it prove that dragons were real?" asked Elsa.

"... Yes?"

"Sounds reasonable to me."

"That's not how logic works! Look, we have certain rules like modus ponens, modus tollens, contraposition-"

"Ahhh! The witch is casting a curse on us!"

"Save us!"

"What gives you the right to judge us?"

"I'm the head of the Church," said Elsa, crossing her arms.

"The Pope!"

"The Pope!"

"It's the Pope!"

"Wait, if she's the Pope, where's her Pope hat? Liar!"

"Phony!"

"Charlatan!"

"I'm not the Pope. The Pope is the head of the Catholic Church," said Elsa.

"I thought the Catholics worshiped Satan."

"No, I correspond with several Catholic theol-"

"SHE TRAFFICS WITH PAPISTS! DEMON LOVER!"

"She takes the seed of the devil!"

"Satanist!"

"The word 'papist' is derived from 'pope'. The Catholic Church is led by the Pope. I lead our Church," said Elsa.

"Right, right. We'll play your game. So, if you really are the leader of the Church, why should we worship the Jesus?"

"Yeah, what did God ever do for us?"

"This guy has real superpowers."

"Jesus was able to duplicate fish and bread. He rose from the dead. He turned water to wine. He walked on water," said Elsa.

"Lame. The Great Clean One can clean my dishes. Besides, if Jesus is so great, why hasn't he done any miracles for me?"

"Cleanliness is Godliness!"

"Yeah, I can see the Great Clean One's acts for myself."

"... I can literally create life," said Elsa.

"So can my vagina!"

"Why don't you show us right now?"

"I'm not going to create a living being for your amusement! That's incredibly unethical!" said Elsa.

"Ha. Knew she was a faker."

"Cheat!"

Elsa grumbled. It was time to end this farce. She began to push her way through the crowd, heading directly for the tub of soap solution by the preacher. Anna's eyes widened and she quickly followed. Even in the best of times, heels can be difficult and awkward to walk in. Years of wearing them had accustomed Elsa to their unwieldy gait, yet in this moment, as she attempted to blow a massive bubble, her grace failed her. She toppled over, falling into the soap. Her mouth would taste of it for the next week.

"The unbeliever has been shamed by the Great Clean One!" shouted the preacher.

The crowd was getting unrulier. Anna kicked Elsa up into the air and caught her with her shoulder. Elsa groaned as she slammed into Anna. The soap cultists were closing in. Anna drew her shotgun and leveled it at the crowd. The cultists stopped, cowed into submission. With Elsa thrown over her shoulder and shotgun still in hand, Anna slowly backed her way out of the slum. That was the end of that.

Later that night, there was a ball. The nobles danced their empty dances and made their meaningless formal gestures. It was makeup caked onto a festering wound.

When they got word of the upcoming Eglinton Tournament, it didn't take much for Anna to convince Elsa to go. Elsa looked out of the window and saw only the soupy smog.

Eglinton would be foolish on several different levels, like a stupidity hypercube.

First of all, it was a medieval tournament in a day and age that was very much not medieval. None of the lordlings present had the foggiest idea of how to properly fight in the ancient armor. Indeed, most of them did not even know how to fight in modern armor. The whole business was a wild lark, a flight of Victorian fancy gone very, very far. The armor was heavy, hot, and confusing. The grounds had been made soggy and muddy by prolonged rain, and the banquet pavilion had been ruined. Visitors watched as some protected their old and incredibly valuable rented armor from the rain using umbrellas, silk shielding steel rather than the other way around.

Still, a full hundred thousand had showed up to watch the Medieval Ages live again. That day, aristocratic would be shown to the world in full force.

Visitors had been encouraged to wear period-appropriate costume. Of course, few of them had any idea of what that was, so they just came in whatever they deemed most old-timey. Naturally, very little of it matched the era and most everyone looked quite silly.

After much waiting in the muck and rain, the first joust began. It was a battle between the Knight of the Swan (A certain Mr. Jerningham) and the Knight of the Golden Lion (a Mr. Fairlie). Because the Earl of Eglinton would be legally responsible if anyone was actually was injured, they were using practice lances. The horses prepared themselves. The knights charged towards each other...

And missed. They turned around and charged again.

Miss.

Well, third time would be the charm, right?

No. At this point, much of the crowd was laughing.

They resolved to give it one more go. Once again, they both missed. A tie was declared to prevent them from further embarrassing themselves.

The next few jousts passed without incident, the knights actually succeeding, against all odds, at hitting each other. After their jousts, the victorious knight would go to the fair ladies and perform a little ritual of courtly love, a celebration of adultery that the minds of the time (and the medieval era) had fallen in love with. Although, who could really blame them? NTR and cuckolding fetishes continue to be popular to the present day.

The jousts complete, the nobles retired for the day.

The next day, Elsa and Anna returned to the festivities. The knights did a little parade and showed off their fancy museum piece armor. Then a herald declared that it was now time for the knights to engage in melee, and that the great warriors of the realm were now invited to come down to prove their mettle. It was a little piece of harmless bluster. After all, the only people with access to such rare antique armor were the nobles in attendance, right?

It was at this point that Elsa noticed her sister was missing. The knights lined up, broomsticks in hand. They couldn't be given real weapons, after all. They might hurt themselves! Worse, they might actually inflict some damage. It would be a tragedy to dent such beautiful armor, and the bodies inside being dented would also be somewhat unpleasant.

A strange figure came running in. She was wearing Viking mail and a helmet, authentic Polish hussar wings strapped to her back. It was Anna. Of course it was Anna. Elsa looked on squeamishly. Those were intended for preservation! The mail was already scarce at the time of its manufacture. Few Viking warriors could afford its production, and surviving pieces were exceedingly uncommon. Now she was running right into the assembled knights.

They were confused. Who was this strange madwoman? This confusion was cleared up as soon as she arrived and threw a haymaker into one of them. It had 900 joules of force behind it, double the muzzle energy of a 9mm pistol. Needless to say, the force traveled through the helmet and nicely rearranged the face inside. A knight swung his broomstick at Anna. Her hand jerked upwards, grabbing the stick. With a single fluid twitch, she snapped the stick in half.

This was not part of the plan. Another knight came charging Anna. She quickly sidestepped the clumsy effort, tripping him. As he fell forward, she grabbed him and tossed him over, throwing him at another two knights twenty feet away, bowling them both over.

Elsa found herself hypnotized by the fluid action of Anna's body. The muscles flowed, and they did not flow gracefully. No one could call what she was doing graceful. Instead, it had a certain brutal energy to it. It was the brutal energy of a clumsy, oafish person who had never learned how to stop being clumsy and oafish, instead opting to simply power through. Might made right. It was like a tsunami overturning a fleet, a brick smashing through a window. It was the thunder of artillery and the thudding action of a relentless overcharged steam engine. It was the thickness and stodginess of practical strength built by work and hard living.

Instinctively, Anna began a rabbit punch against another foe, a punch that would break necks and kill men, when she remembered where she was. She stopped halfway through and simply delivered an uppercut, sending the tin can man flying. As she swung her body through its motions, the wings on her back rattled. Long ago, they had both deterred Tartar lassos and intimidated the foes of the Commonwealth. When the enemy heard the dreadful clatter, they knew fear.

Anna had fought in almost every major European conflict of the last thirty years, and quite a few outside the continent as well. Long after Elsa's death, she would be fighting still. She had bled and bled much. She would fight longer than most average lifespans. In the

rattling of her wings, they heard the sound of an Angel of Death. They heard the sound of War Incarnate. And War is anathema to mercy.

The poor little nobles and their untried hands never stood a chance. Within moments, Anna stood triumphant, the dust clouds settling on the unconscious bodies of her foes. The crowds began to cheer raucously. After all, they had no idea that this was not planned. They didn't know this wasn't supposed to happen. It was spectacle, and glorious spectacle at that. The maidens shifted awkwardly in their seats. Was this supposed to happen? Should one of them give a token of affection now? At last, one mustered the courage to rise and approach. She handed Anna a kerchief. Anna nodded, but beckoned for more of the women to come.

"Vae victis!" came her shout. Like Brennus, she had come to claim her spoils.

The rest nervously walked up to Anna and presented their own tokens. With a smile, she gathered them all up and returned to the stands. Elsa was still seated. Anna unceremoniously dumped the mound of tokens onto Elsa's lap with a grin.

"Happy late birthday, Elsa," said Anna.

"So I think that annexing Schleswig is clearly the best option," said Bismarck.

"... I don't like it," said Rapunzel.

"The time is right, my Kaiserin. Eric's son is still untried and the southerners would support us."

"And then we just let the rest of Denmark starve?"

"Precisely. Political famine. The fastest way to strike at the people is to go for the stomach. When their children's bellies bloat with hunger

and women drop dead in the streets, they will reconsider their choice of ruler. That is when we strike and reclaim Denmark."

"It still bothers me."

"It's our best chance. If we let it pass, we may never get the Danish lands back. They rely too heavily on Jutland, it is their Achilles heel. Crush it, and we crush them."

"Let me sleep on it."

"As you will."

Bismarck poked his steak lazily while he watched the two ladies next to him. As a sovereign Duke, Prince of Bismarck, and Chancellor of the Empire, he was entitled to a place of honor by Rapunzel's right. He used this privileged spot to do what he always did: observe and analyze. His wine glass was still full. There would be other times to impair his mental faculties. Schleswig was on the line.

With gulping bites, Anna wolfed down another chunk of steak. She tried to speak, but it only came out as garbled mumbles. She paused and swallowed the hunk of meat in one go, the blob rolling down her throat before disappearing. She gestured her fork at Rapunzel.

"This is good steak," said Anna.

"It is, isn't it? I told the cooks to add a bit more thyme," said Rapunzel as she cut another piece off.

"Tasty stuff."

"How have the Icelanders been?"

"Picture of obedience, as always," said Anna dully. "A model colony."

"I should hope so, considering how their last revolt went."

Anna watched the patterning of the wallpaper. It went up, it went down. It went up, it went down. It went to one side, it went to the other. Squares and squares, wheels within wheels. The sun rises, it falls again.

"Maybe it was a little too harsh. Still, if you act like an ungrateful pack of pricks, you're going to get the smackdown. But... argh!" shouted Anna. She squeezed her vodka bottle, and little cracks ran their way up and down its length. She raised the bottle up and started chugging it down, her eyes watering as the drink burned her throat.

"Fuck, it never used to hurt so bad! Body is getting so weak and useless now, hell in a handbasket. Hell in a handbasket!" said Anna.

"Calm down. It's been years, what's done is done," said Rapunzel.

"I still can't believe them. After all we did for them, all the sweat and tears, they up and revolt. They up and revolt! They couldn't even wait until the funeral was over before they started burning her in effigy. Iceland was **nothing**, nothing before Arendelle annexed it. A hick backwater in the middle of the sea, forgotten even by its rulers. She gave them bread, factories, homes, and they spit in her face. She was too good for them. She was too good for all of us."

"Shhh, shhh," said Rapunzel. She got up and hugged Anna. "Let it all out. It's okay."

"She was a saint. She was a saint and I let her down. I was the spare. I was Arendelle's sword and shield, and I failed. I was supposed to keep Elsa safe and I failed. She always cared so much. I tried to make her see the good side to her actions, but... I was never any good at that. Mom and Dad weren't bad people. But Arendelle was so poor back then. There were so many hungry people. Elsa fixed all of that. She put bread on people's tables but she only ever saw the smog. The clouds always hid the silver lining for her."

Anna sighed.

"I guess I never understood her. No one did, really, except for her. It really shook her when Alexander died. He was the only non-family friend she had. She never really got used to living publicly. Twenty one years will breed a mean habit, I guess. Maybe I should have been Queen, maybe then she wouldn't have been burdened so much. No, I wouldn't be able to do it. She was something else, otherworldly. You should have seen her with the ledgers. It was like poetry in motion. What was it? Engineering is science given life? She was like a fish in water, but the water is numbers and the fish breathes math or something."

Anna looked at her own reflection in the cracked bottle. It looked back and grinned sardonically.

"She tried to explain it once. How the price of iron affects the French-Moroccan trade routes, the interplay between the simplifying of the British tax code and the Zollverein's grain market, shear strengths of various materials and what implications that had on worldwide construction, the way everything just clicked together for her. I... didn't understand. I never do. I was the stupid one. She knew it, I knew it, mom and dad knew it. Fractals. She said her soul was like that. She invented the word. Invented the concept."

"It sounds pretty. What does it mean?"

Anna threw her hands up.

"I don't know! That was always the problem, I didn't know anything! I tried to help but... but... It hurts so much to see someone you love suffer without knowing how to help. So much easier to kill people. So much easier to hurt. She needed more friends, but how was I supposed to give her that? She needed someone just as smart as her, but there's no one like that! That's why the candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long, isn't it? Because no one understands it, because it's bright but alone. And then there was me, looking at the wax puddle, trying to make it a candle again. The door

was always there, and neither of us had the key, and sometimes Olaf would pick the lock but just as I thought we were making progress, every time, it would slam shut again. And I would be alone with her, alone together. Huh. I guess those were working metaphors."

Anna looked at the half-steak on her plate and stuffed it down her maw. She made a token effort at chewing before it went down.

The room was quiet but for the sound of chewing and drinking.

"I've probably seen more friends killed than most people ever make," whispered Anna. "Where does the time go?"

"At least you made the most of the time you had. How was America?"

"The usual. Murdered a few people, threw fuel on the fire, caused incidents."

"I can always count on you," said Rapunzel with a smile.

"Slavery's disgusting. Blood washes away all evils. It's handy."

"At least it wasn't Chile, right?"

"Come on, you're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"You beat up an entire ballroom of diplomats."

"Yeah, well, they started it."

"You did call one of their mothers a whore."

"Whoa ho ho, slow down there. I did not! I said that their mother reminded me of a whore I fucked, I wasn't saying she was a whore or that I fucked her. I mean, uhhhhhh, yeah. It's not my fault if they misinterpreted. Besides, she was a very pretty whore, and nice too."

"Right."

"And it all ended well because I got to eat all of the chocolate and the little finger sandwiches."

"A toast to the Chilean Empire!"

"To the Chilean Empire!"

Rapunzel returned to her seat and they clinked glasses.

"I like England better," said Anna. "Reminds me of home. Same air quality, wonderful people..."

"They're backstabbing hypocrites with god complexes and terrible teeth."

"Yeah, fun and stylish to have as enemies, unpredictable and wily as allies! Man, I need to tell you stories about Lord Byron. Good times, good times..."

"I hear the man was quite a character."

"He was. You know, he might've even fucked his own sister. He kinda off-handedly mentioned it while we were in Macedonia."

"So did you! You scared poor Gothel and your nephew half to death!"

Anna stirred some pasta with her fork and grumbled.

"He was never as powerful as you and me. He didn't confirm it, he just smirked and said that he had 'tasted many a forbidden fruit' when I pressed further, but still... the rumors were enough. It was scandalous. His name was on the tongue of every nagging shrew from London to Edinburgh. I wouldn't have met him if he hadn't been in Italy, but maybe he'd still be around."

"It's what people do. You just kinda have to deal."

"I don't **want** to deal. It's not right! All these stuffed shirts and their so-called 'high-brow' morals and standards, they're all fake! The

insides of all of those bastards are hollow, just like Hans!" she said, spitting the name out of her mouth. "They prance around pretending they're so pure and innocent when everyone knows what happens behind closed doors and in back alleys. I read Jane Eyre and it made me want to puke."

"Really? I thought it was cute, scary, and even a little sassy! Rawr! Rochester was a hunk, but don't tell Eugene I said that."

"It was. It was also too real. I couldn't keep my hands from shaking as I turned the pages, and halfway through, I threw the book into the fire, put on my coat, went to the bookstore and bought a new one. We wanted to give the next generation peace and they grew up to be prudes! And their kids, their kids are growing up even worse! Prudes and hypocrites, that's what we've raised. Give them peace, and they start making up all this stupid fake manners and etiquette while being snobby about everything instead of appreciating what they have. It was all a catch-22."

"Everything worth doing is."

"Russia was a terrible place."

"Hmm?"

"The sweat was forced out of you by the heat, but there was no water to drink. It squeezed all of the energy out of you, like you were a sponge... but... not. Reverse sponge. You could see people's ribs peeking out through the skin, and the skin wasn't much better. The skin was nearly see-through, like everyone was made of glass. And there I was, in the field hospital, watching a boy barely younger than me struggling to hold his own guts in. Corporal Marchessault from Lourdes. We started talking about our families, and I told him that I would do anything for Elsa."

Anna stopped, a lump forming in her throat as she drank in the memory, well aware that she had just spent the last fifteen minutes rambling on and on.

"Was I a liar?" asked Anna in a low voice.

"Of course not," replied Rapunzel.

Anna smiled weakly.

That night, she went to her room, and Kristoff held her in a warm embrace. But Death was there too, for Death was always there, for Death was her constant companion. And Death ran her thin finger down Anna's back, and Anna shivered with savage delight. The dew drops rested easily on Death's luscious lips, the salacious turns of her tongue beckoning the damned forward. So the mountain man held her, but Death tucked her in, and sapphic Death blessed the night.

The next morn, the sun emerged from the underworld, as was its wont. Rapunzel and her chancellor met again. The answer to his request was a decisive no. Even if Denmark stayed independent forever, they would let it be. There would be no political famine. Bismarck shrugged and let this one slide. He had other, more important battles.

But, of course, ideas, bad and good alike, never really die.

Attila, not the first but certainly the last, dug up a dusty old folder with a baby inside and christened the child Holodomor. So it goes and such it went.

On the Cross

Author Notes: This garbled version of Brave brought to you by Google Translate. It's amazing how different a story can become after it's been translated through a dozen languages and back.

The Tamberlies aren't a real aristocratic family.

Elsa waited outside the door, afraid to knock.

It had all started a few weeks ago. Yet again, Anna wanted to go on a trip to England. Who was she to say no?

The trip started with a visit to the beach. Elsa quite liked the beach, at least in theory. In practice, she rarely had the time to go. Still, it would be nice. Refreshing drinks, hot sand, sunshine.

A wooden box.

There was a wooden box there, a very large one. Elsa was confused.

"Anna, what's going on? Why is there a box here?" asked Elsa.

"It's a bathing machine," said Anna.

"I've seen machines before. This is a box."

"Well, it's not a very complicated machine."

"Why do I need a machine to go swimming?"

"It's so you can change."

Anna presented Elsa with a set of frumpy looking clothes. Elsa frowned.

"What's this?" asked Elsa.

"A bathing suit," said Anna.

"What's a bathing suit? Why can't I just wear a chemise?"

"This is a bathing suit."

"Who invented this and for what purpose?"

"The kids nowadays think that it's immoral and scandalous to dress like that. You know, just the other day I was recounting a story of my sexual conquests to a young man and he turned beet-red. Told me that a prim and proper old lady such as myself shouldn't be talking about those kinda things."

"On the one hand, you really shouldn't be talking like that. Mother must be rolling in her grave. On the other hand, this sucks. Where's King George? The least he could do is put a stop to his subjects' nonsense."

"He's too busy being a drunken lardmountain to protect our right to party."

Elsa shook her head and clucked disapprovingly.

"All these kids and their radical new ideas. Whippersnappers these days need to respect the views of thei- did I just say whippersnappers?"

"Yes."

"Wow. Hey, wait. How did you know what this was?"

"I travel more. I've been to more beaches. I didn't expect one to be here, but they've been around, and they're spreading. Modesty and

all that."

"Ugh."

"Technically it's not illegal to still bathe naked or in a chemise. It's just 'rude'."

"Queens don't act rude. At least not in public."

"I'll suffer with you."

"Thanks."

They went into the machine, redressed, and came out on the other side. Armed with the stunning new technology of bathing suits, they began to splash about in perfect modesty. After about thirty minutes of this, it occurred to Elsa that the beach was quite empty. In fact, it was completely empty. They had arrived early, but certainly there would be others by now?

It was at this time that Rapunzel and Eugene came walking by. Rapunzel was wearing a frilly little thing that was about as far from the full-body bathing suit as you could get.

...

Eugene.

Why was Eugene on a woman's beach? Rapunzel waved. Elsa waved back.

"Hey cousin, fancy meeting you here," chirped Rapunzel.

"Hello. Why is Eugene here?" asked Elsa.

"Why wouldn't he be here? Eugene is the bestest, isn't that right, honey?" said Rapunzel.

Eugene idly looked back, having already made his way towards the bathing machine. He slipped the mirror inside the box into his pocket.

"Hmm? What? Oh yeah, swimming, bathing, beaches. That sort of thing. Looking good, Blondie," responded Eugene, the absolute picture of attentiveness.

Rapunzel clasped her hands over her heart and squealed with girlish delight. Eugene made another sweep of the machine for loot. Elsa tried to keep a straight face. Anna was being fascinated by the scrabbling of a hermit crab, lost in her own little world.

"But it's a woman's beach," said Elsa.

"Hmm? Ah, that. It wouldn't be much fun to go on a vacation without my dearest hubby, would it? So I went ahead and bought out the whole beach for a day. It was only ten thousand pounds or so," said Rapunzel.

"So I didn't have to wear this," said Elsa, gesturing at her suit.

"Nope. You look sort of stupid."

Rapunzel and Eugene wandered into the water and began to splash about. Anna had made progress and was now playing a pinching game against the crab. Perhaps it would be a good time to take a nap. For some reason or another, the recent series of events had quite tired her. Mere mortals produced sand castles. Elsa had the Divine Right of Kings, and also ice powers. She made a little ice castle on the beach, went inside, and curled into a tiny ball, letting sleep take her.

When she awoke and looked outside, the castle was surrounded by trenches. Rapunzel and Anna were busy shoveling sand around while Eugene was working on a sandy bust of himself. He was placing the finishing touches on it. Despite his best efforts, the nose wasn't right.

"Anna, what's with the trenches?" asked Elsa.

"A good soldier follows orders!" barked Anna.

"Okay. Rapunzel, why are there so many trenches?" asked Elsa.

"You made a castle. What kind of a castle isn't fortified?"

"A fake one."

Rapunzel's eyes narrowed.

"Fake? Nein, nein. This is the first of many. It is our staging ground. The corpulent fool sits in his palace, unknowing. His decadence has made him weak. Discipline makes us strong. The sea lion roars, cousin. The sea lion is hungry. We will take the beaches of Britain, and from there, all of the Isles. It is destiny! It is Lebensraum!" shouted Rapunzel.

"I'd say that's a 3/10," said Eugene.

Rapunzel gave him a thumbs up.

"So how's the beach?" asked Anna.

"I think the part of my personality that likes to sing about summer should find something new. Maybe a nice Swiss chocolate shop."

Next on the itinerary was a trip to a museum. In fact, it was a trip to **the museum**, the only one in town. It was the Dunbroch museum. Never mind that Dunbroch was hundreds of miles away. The tour guide began to drone on with his story.

The predecessor to modern Scotland, the Kingdom of DunBroch, was founded to deal with the incursions of the Vikings as well as the meddling of the English. At the time of Fergus, English-Scots relations were actually quite warm. King Fergus had to get his daughter Merida a birthday gift for her sixth birthday. He went to the

Slope, ruled by Mor'du the Arrow. The accounts have garbled the true nature of Mor'du. Some claim he was King of the Vikings. Others say he ruled the Fae deep beneath the Slope. Still others claim he was a bear. He is called by many different names. Mor'du the Arrow, Mor'du the Devourer, Mor'du the Great Heathen, Mor'du the United, and Mor'du the Sleeping Bear. Unaware of the duplicitous nature of Mor'du, Fergus gets his gift. It is only after he has accepted it that Mor'du names his price, summoning his dark familiars to take Fergus's left leg.

The Scots knew that infighting could be deadly when so many enemies surrounded them. Thus, they had a custom in which the King would crown their successor in their own lifetime, making them a junior King. This King-in-Waiting was known as the Son of the Flames. Ten years after Mor'du had taken Fergus's leg, Merida had come of age. It was time for the anointment. Unfortunately, the ceremony goes disastrously awry, fire spreading over the sacred jewels and cross. It was a horrific omen, and Eleanor was suddenly struck mute. Blue fairies suddenly appeared all around DunBroch, and mushrooms sprouted all over the castle. Fergus was appalled. His ancient enemy, Mor'du, had returned. He retreated to the chapel to pray for deliverance. Eleanor was able to use the ancient runes to tell Merida to seek the Witch, despite being mute. The identity of the Witch is again conflicted, but most believe it to be the wife of Alfred the Great, Ealhswith, making the Witch-King a distinct figure and identifying him as Alfred the Great. The Witch informed Merida that her father had eaten the nuts, the food of the fae, and thus was now beyond the reach and mercy of God. Only by striking Mor'du down could the curse be broken.

Merida returned to DunBroch. In the night, Mor'du visited. He called out to Merida and demanded his due payment. Merida nodded and cast a fine carpet onto the ground. Mor'du smiled but found that he was compelled to count the strands. Indeed, as he counted, the amount of strands only seemed to grow larger. By that time, the carpet had grown into a great castle. Mor'du growled. He had been tricked. He howled, and screeched, and clawed, and bit, and brought

the castle down. Again, Mor'du called out to Merida and demanded his due payment. Merida fed a gold coin to a fish and tossed it into the river. Mor'du snarled and jumped into the river, tearing and eating every fish he could find. By the time he had found the coin, a great deal of time had passed. A third time, Mor'du called out to Merida. Lords Macintosh, MacGuffin, and Inverness had rallied their forces. From the south came Lords Harris, Bell, and Jimmy, led by the Witch-King of Wessex himself.

"Enough games," said Merida. "This time I will pay you in cold iron."

Mor'du howled at the betrayal and transformed into a dove, flying away. He laughed with delight. His host was unseen, the only hint of their presence being blue wisps in the air. At this, the Witch-King laughed back. The Witch-King had the One Ring of Ragnar Lodbrok, and it gave him power over the Heavens and the Earth. With a flourish, he cast a spell revealing Mor'du's host. Jarls and shieldmen gasped as their invisibility faded away. Then their surprise turned to rage and they transformed into an army of things which were like bears but not. The un-bears, the bears which were not. The man-bears. The men of DunBroch and Wessex had cold iron, and they would be mightier than the bear-men.

But the Witch called Merida to her side. Merida was confused. The Witch explained that killing Mor'du would not strike him down. Mor'du was Fae, and thus beyond the rules of their world. Slaying him would only be a minor setback. Fergus had erred in this manner. Merida would have to find another way to defeat Mor'du. Merida scoffed. Force of arms could accomplish anything.

The two armies faced each other. On the side of the British were 1,000 stout men. The Great Heathen Army numbered between 3,000 men and 100,000 Fae. They began to charge at each other. At first, the Fae Vikings were clearly winning, their berserker rages and bear strength giving them the clear advantage. Then the Witch-King made a single incantation, and the English found themselves growing ghostly and wraith-like. The bear-men were shocked, their claws no longer to harm the English. The English gave out a great cheer and

set their blades upon the bearmen. The cold iron of their swords and armor was too mighty, and soon the Fae were set to flight.

Merida went straight for Mor'du. Mor'du attempted to flee, but Merida spoke his true name and challenged him to a duel, and he was compelled to stay. Thus, their great battle began, a battle that would last a year and a day. First Mor'du cast a thousand suns into the air, daring the world to burn to a crisp. But Merida was the finest archer in the land, and she laughed at Mor'du's pathetic magic. With a single flurry, she shot out ten thousand arrows, ten for every sun Mor'du could make. The suns came crashing down to the earth, leaving terrible craters where they landed. Over the years, the meltwater would fill these craters, and these would become the lochs of Scotland. Some of the smaller suns fell more slowly, and can still be seen falling today. These shooting stars are the remnants of the great battle against Mor'du.

Mor'du was scared that his spell did not seem to work, but he was not done. The two now set to dueling with their swords. For nine months did they fight, but neither could gain ground. Though Merida's breath grew ragged and sweat beaded her brow, and though Mor'du's muscles ached and his bruises stung, neither would surrender. At last, Mor'du thought of a devious trick. He summoned a mountain in front of Merida, expecting that it would stop her, and then scoffed at the strength of man. But Merida scoffed in turn, and sliced the mountain up, sending the chunks hurtling through the sky. And the greatest of these chunks landed in the sea, and the assembled armies marvelled and said that this ought to be known as the Isle of Man.

Mor'du changed into a bear. Merida then called upon the powers of Scotland and turned her body to stone. Mor'du's claws could not cut through Merida's skin, but neither could Merida harm Mor'du. After the battle had lasted a year in a total, Merida began to reconsider. Perhaps the Witch had been right. It was then that Eleanor threw herself in front of Mor'du. Eleanor was injured, but Mor'du was

startled. It was then that Merida understood that a mother's love was a real magic, and she struck Mor'du down.

Of course, by then Merida had learned her lesson. Mor'du could not be slain through mortal means. This was why, even in defeat, Mor'du was self-assured. So Merida called the Witch to her, and the Witch cast several wooden idols at Mor'du's feet. Mor'du was confused. But Merida saw the sign of the cross and lifted it up, and Mor'du understood. And so the Viking men were broken, for Christ was mightier than any of them, and they settled down in the British Isles, mortal forevermore. And Merida knew to respect her mother, and to respect her Father up in Heaven.

The standard interpretation (one not told to Elsa, as the museum was unabashed propaganda) was simple. The Kingdom of DunBroch, unlike the the modern United Kingdom, was composed of many bickering clans each with their interests and motivations. Religion, as it often does, offered a means of control. The invading Vikings were a common enemy King Fergus could rally the Scots against. What nobler cause was there than God and country?

The Vikings were confused with Fae because they did seem somewhat otherworldly. They came from across the sea. Some fought like absolute madmen. They were bloodthirsty. No matter how many times they were defeated, they just came back. They were obviously not men. The way they treated their own lives could only mark them as strange, supernatural beings. In reality, it was often desperately. England was rich and their homelands were poor. When the choice was between a starving death or glorious death in battle, who could choose the former?

As for their defeat by cold iron? Alfred the Great opened his reign by giving tribute to the Viking invaders. If Wessex was to prosper, however, they needed to be defeated decisively. The peace his silver had bought had to be put to good use. He reorganized the army. Instead of long service periods, men would serve short periods of time, but the schedule would be rotated such that Wessex could always have strong men ready to fight for it. Instead of quantity,

quality. The Viking quantity would not be overcome. Instead, Wessex would make its men out of steel. The thanes had an obligation to their liege to pay back the goods given to them on death. If one died, the goods could be used to equip and train a unit of fresh soldiers. Eight horses, four suits of mail, eight shields and spears, four swords, and gold, this was the due of a king's thane. King Alfred was a theologian and wise in the ways of the Church, and he could use those arcane but powerful Latin prayers to motivate his men. To those unaccustomed to it, the Latin sounds and the fearlessness of disciplined soldiers must've seemed like some enchantment being worked. Alfred would sound and look like some Witch-King to their eyes, not a Christian man. The Vikings broke and fell, their leaders to be converted to Christianity in the peace.

Eventually, a bastard would rise. He would conquer England and bring his men with him. With his victory, England was finally and thoroughly pulled from the hands of Nordic culture. Scotland would soon follow. Distrustful of their southern neighbors, the Scots would forge ties with France. Thus the British Isles were given from the Scandinavian world to the West.

Enter a man interested in history and the old Saxon legends. Not only interested, but expert in them. His Britain was not their Britain. It was a safer place. It was a more prosperous place. The people were long lived, their wants were satisfied. But was it a better place? The smog clouded sky looked dimly upon the land. The streets had living reminders of the horrors of war walking them. They had gained in wealth, but had they paid with their souls? England was lost. England's God was dead. But he could try to give them something to believe in. He would revive the old legends, bring back the old culture. They could believe. They could hope.

Alfred the Great had won. He had won by building. But this was the world his building had led to. It was a rich world, but a cold one. It was a happy world, but a hollow one. The life was there, but the magic wasn't. So Alfred was recast in the Witch-King mold, being reforged into the man the Scots told stories about. He would be a

mortal king, and a well-meaning one, once. But power would tempt him. That power would twist him and the ancient England he came from into modern industrial England.

And so a modern bard wove a modern epic and the world listened. It was a story about earnestness, temptation, hobbits, and rings.

Still, questions remained. Old Alfred was not so old at the time, being the youngest and only surviving son of his parents, his brothers having been killed struggling against the heathens. Why would he be painted as so wizened?

This was not Merida's real story at all. But this is how it came to be remembered after more than a thousand years of lost records and retellings. Eventually, in the early 2000s, someone would find "Yvng MacGvffin's True and Honest Accovnt of the Mor'dv", right about the time Scottish independence was being discussed. As it turns out, most of the Merida legend had been greatly, greatly exaggerated. Most of the work done to expel the heathens had been done by Alfred the Great. They lost the referendum.

But things began to make more sense. Merida did not fight against the Great Heathen Army, she was far too young and immature at the time. She had the seed of her future martial skills, but not the hardened spirit. She needed the Prince's cruelty and the Prince's love to temper that cruelty. She did not have an iron fist in a velvet glove, only a lump of molten metal. That battle would later be added to her legend.

Instead, she traveled. She and her mother traveled the world. First Scotland, then elsewhere. Her travels would bring her to the Carolingian Empire, by then an empire in twilight. Even in its decay, however, the images must've made an impression on young Merida. Charlemagne had been Holy Roman Emperor. Now the Imperial Eagle flew into Merida's imagination. Each soldier had a breastplate, helmet (much rarer where she came from), lance, shield, and bow. Their discipline was impressive. They were very much unlike the bickering, boorish nobles of her native DunBroch.

This would be the note that defined the reign of Merida the Brave, virgin Queen of DunBroch. Wessex had opened her childhood. Wessex taught the lesson of quality. The Carolingian Empire reinforced it. There could be no doubt-the path forward was military reform. Under Merida, DunBroch shored up its military. It was brought into a fully modern feudal framework. DunBroch needed strong soldiers if it was to survive the coming centuries. This would be an entirely new breed of men. This breed of men would have iron wills. They would be reared from youth to know war, to breathe it like air, to drink blood as if it was water. Their profession would be war, they would be professionals. Their equipment would all be state-of-art, unquestionably modern. They would be her men, her fighting men. So she decreed it, so it was done.

Thus, enter the Knight. His coming would be terrible indeed.

DunBroch was not Scotland. But it would be soon. These new fighting men, these knights, were unlike anything the warring clans of DunBroch had ever seen before. They had been used to significant levels of freedom. It was time for Merida to remind them who was in charge. With knights backing her, the nobles could not afford to dissent. True, if they had all rallied and fought together, they might've won. But it would be a pyrrhic victory at best, mutually ensured destruction followed by the annihilation and conquest of DunBroch. The nobles kneeled. Domestic concerns settled and the tribes unified, she now did what all unifying warlords did. Like Alexander the Great before her and Genghis Khan after, like so many conquerors, she gazed outwards. The knights of DunBroch began their conquests. The Isle of Man fell. The Vikings were pushed out. Her title was the Queen of the Scots, after all, so she ought to rule them all. Bit by bit, DunBroch came to resemble modern Scotland.

Merida was always reluctant to marry. She refused the suitors early in her life. As she ascended to the throne, she found more and more things to do in lieu of romance. Subjugate rebel nobles, conquer outlying kingdoms, reform the kingdom. Brash and aggressive, she had never gotten along with her nobles, and there was hardly a year

without at least one plot against her. Still, very few noticed that their Queen was growing older and older until she was well past childbearing age. It was always the business of another day, for today would be the day of conquest. The tables were always full of mead and meat, so why worry? Merida would never marry. Her child would be Scotland.

Not that the child would be born without birthing pains. At age 71, Merida suddenly fell ill. In the end, she had been right. Manners, grace, all these girly ways? They had all been unnecessary. In blood, there is triumph. Might makes right. The nobles circled around her like vultures. They eagerly awaited her choice of successor.

As a girl, her parents had tried to sell her hand to the mightiest. Such was not so strange. After all, the King ought to be the strongest. It was a common custom for nobles in many lands to convene to elect the strongest man as their next King. Was the passing of her lands so different from the passing of her hand? Indeed, she could set up a new kind of tourney.

Thus, Merida of DunBroch croaked her final words, and they hung in the air.

"To the strongest!"

And so came the succession crisis. For almost two centuries, it would rage off and on, filling the lochs of Scotland with blood and sowing its fields with bones. First, the crown went to the Dingwalls. Then came the fall of the House of Dingwall. Their castle was sacked, their soldiers slaughtered, and the members, men, women, children, were all put to the sword. The benefactors of this purge would be the House of MacLannister. They would not celebrate long. No sooner did the crown come to rest on a head did that head come rolling off. Three kingdoms, four kingdoms, ten kings, fifty kings, corpses, corpses all! Finally, the crown came to a man named MacBeth. Legend would make him a monster. In truth, he was nothing more than a man. He was a man with ambition, a man of some skill, but a man nonetheless. Though some would hate him,

many others would find him to be an amiable and praiseworthy man. But he gambled and lost. The crown came to rest with Malcolm, and with his line it stayed.

There, Scotland was born. When Malcolm took the throne, he did not invoke his distant blood connection to the DunBroch kings of old, but a far more recent connection to one of the many warring claimant kings. When the nobles swore, they swore to him and to Scotland, not to DunBroch.

Elsa was not aware of all of this. All she heard was the legend, the propaganda. It sounded like bunk. In fact, it was bunk. It was then that she noticed that one of the tour guides, the one most insistent that the legend was the only real version and interpretation, was not wearing tartan. He had a fake kilt taped to the front of his pants. Furthermore, he wasn't speaking in a Scottish accent at all. The tour guide noticed her noticing and pulled Elsa aside.

"You may be wondering what's going on, Queen Elsa of Arendelle," said the man.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?" asked Elsa.

"I'm in his Majesty's employ. Of course I know your name. You see these people? These are Scottish nationalists. These people are very silly. Their ideas will never catch on, but just to be safe, we're throwing a spanner in the works. Got it?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I know you like chocolate. Want some?"

"Is this a bribe?"

"Yes."

"It's not a very large one."

"No. But you don't care about this stuff, do you?"

"Nope."

"Good woman. Take the chocolate."

Elsa and Anna left the museum.

"You know, while we're not doing anything, why did you like Napoleon so much anyways?" asked Elsa.

"Err... umm... ohhh... hmmm... I'll answer that later! I need cheese! Mmmm, cheese!"

Next was a trip to the market. Anna was there to buy cheeses. She put on a balaclava.

"Why are you wearing a mask?" asked Elsa.

"Because this is very illegal cheese," said Anna.

"Illegal... cheese?"

"It's just the mayor being a sourpuss, the police, the cheesemaker, and I are on good terms. As long as it looks secret, nobody needs to know, right?"

"But that mask is really out-of-place. You're wearing a mask in public."

"But masks hide things, duh! I swear, sometimes you make me think that I'm not not the smart one for things doing."

"What?"

"I'll be right back."

Anna scampered off towards the cheese store. Elsa started twiddling her thumbs. A man sidled on over.

"My dearest madame, if I was to inquire to the price of repairing your dress after a gentle stroll and some light dinner, how much would that be, hypothetically?"

"Excuse me?"

"If you and someone else were to visit the Opera and listen to some comedies, it would be most pleasing to receive compensation. What sort of figures might that run?"

"I don't think I understand..."

"If we were to engage in some light petting and geological expeditions, would it be apropos to bring something along the lines of one hundred pounds? Two hundred pounds of gear? Three?"

"Geological expeditions?"

"Your price, dear. A fine lady such as yours must command a bounty like that of Helen of Troy's or Madame Pompadour's! I imagine yours must be the finest house in all London."

"You must be making a mistake, sir. I don't know what you're talking about!" objected Elsa.

"Hmm? Oh, I see! Rest assured, fair damsel, I can pay handsomely, and my manner is graceful and delicate. I come from a family of only the finest breeding, my dear. I am absolutely certain that I can afford any price, no matter how steep! Even a King's ransom, if need be. Anything for a fine beauty like yourself."

"That's not what I meant! I am not in that trade, good sir!"

"If discretion is what is needed, be at ease. I can provide it. I know of many secret places and private penthouses. My mansion is the very picture of stately opulence, elegant, luxurious, yet dignified. If it is the police you fear, I have connections. A few handsome gifts and coin

purses exchanged, and there will be not a single word. At my command, the watch will be as quiet as Hades itself."

"I'm not... one of those ladies! Good day sir!"

"Playing hard to get?"

"I said good day sir!"

It was at this moment that Elsa was saved from her predicament. A large cheese wheel came flying through the air, hitting the gentleman square in the face. He squealed and clutched his head. Anna came running over, delivering a quick knee to his bollocks. They quite nearly popped from the force, but before he could double over, he got a punch right to the liver and slipped neatly into unconsciousness. Anna scanned the streets for police, then frisked his body, retrieving several large bills from the man's wallet. She pointed a finger at Elsa and nodded.

"Nobody solicits my sister for sex and gets away from it unmugged," said Anna.

"That was a thoroughly unpleasant experience," said Elsa. "What on earth could have given him the notion that I was... uhhh... uhhh..."

Anna looked down sheepishly.

"Well, I mean... you kinda... dress... like that," said Anna.

"I like this dress."

"It shows an awful lot of leg."

"So? Well, fine, there's that."

"Also, your... your way of acting."

"Excuse me? I am the picture of grace!"

"Yes, exactly."

"Huh?"

"Most people... aren't very graceful. A lot are sort of stupid and awkward like me!"

"So what?"

"So... you ever heard of 'the beatings will continue until morale improves'?"

"That sounds awful."

"It's actually a practical technique with practical payoffs! But the point is... uhh... beatings. Some people don't like whores because whores are fun and they hate fun."

"Okay."

"So they make these big old houses for whores but... not like... whore houses. Houses that contain whores. And then they beat them until they reform themselves from their 'fallen' state. These ladies end up really graceful because... well... if they don't, they get beaten some more. But they're so graceful that everyone knows they used to be whores. So it doesn't really help."

"That's terrible. But surely that doesn't justify picking someone like that out as a whore? What are the odds?"

"Really, really good, actually! I mean, how many whores are there already? 1 in 20 women? 1 in 15? Something like that. That means even picking at random isn't a half-bad guess."

"... So why haven't I ever been propositioned earlier?"

"Oh, because I've been around."

"Because I have a bodyguard, they see I'm not one of those... uhh... women?"

"No, they think I'm a client."

"..."

"Lady Tamberly was a whore."

"Baroness Tamberly?!"

"Yup."

And at that, Anna started to walk away. Elsa followed, afraid to let her thoughts catch up. Tonight, they would be staying at the Tamberly's residence, as they usually did on trips.

And so Elsa found herself staring at the door, holding back the knock that needed to come. She gulped, readying herself.

She knocked.

"Come in," came the voice of Lady Tamberly.

Elsa's face must have given it away, for Tamberly's eyes filled with a sudden sadness. She set the darning needles down and ceased the motion of her rocking chair. They looked at each other.

"I see you found out. They say you can't run from the past forever. If you wish to cut ties now and find different lodgings, I would understand," said Tamberly.

"I won't do that," said Elsa.

"Are you sure? You have a reputation to protect. I was being selfish, not telling you. If a scandal had erupted and hurt you, it would've been entirely my fault."

"I've dealt with worse."

"... Thank you."

"It's nothing. There's no need to thank me."

"I insist on it. Many others would and have left."

"I won't. I know how it feels."

"I suppose you'll be wanting to hear the story of it, then."

"You don't have to tell me anything you're not comfortable."

"No. I want to tell you. I want to tell anyone who'll listen, but I never can. Please, stay a while. It all started in Southampton..."

Many years ago, my father was an engineer there. They needed technical people, you know. The baths there were very prominent, but they didn't have good natural beaches. Human ingenuity found a way, of course. Using tidal power, they could power elaborate bathing structures. My father helped keep the baths running. It was there that he met mother. She had come there on vacation and immediately caught my father's eye. Of course, the baths weren't co-ed. Being an employee, however, he had interesting opportunities. He knew the female employees. He pulled strings. They reported her likes and dislikes back to him. When they "met" for the first time, they could finish each other's sentences.

He could, anyways. She was swept off her feet. One day, one of the ladies asked mother to stay behind while the tide drained the baths. At the bottom of the central bath was a ring. Then my father stepped out from behind a door. He asked mother to marry him. She agreed. Months later, I was conceived.

I never really knew my mother. She walked out of the house and my life when I was six and never came back. Father was enough,

though. He was always kind, generous, patient. He loved jokes and loved to laugh. I still remember how his belly jiggled and his eyes watered when he heard a particularly good joke. He had a fatal flaw, though, and in typical fashion, it was his undoing. Father loved to gamble ever so much. He started being absent from the house. Then he missed whole days. Eventually, it would be weeks between visits. His cheeks hollowed, his eyes sank back. He refused to stop, not that I ever asked. Gambling gave him that special thrill, that thrill that he had missed ever since mother left. Eventually, he came back to the house. Some men came in after him. They seized him by his coat and took him away. It was off to debtor's prison with him. I never saw him again.

Years later, I would go looking for records. You know how many people have been imprisoned for decades on charges of less than a single pound? Too many, I learned. As for my father? Well, Britain had always had manpower shortages. The Empire is too large and our men too few. They needed more soldiers. Wellington needed more soldiers. The army was already a haven for beggars and thieves. What proper gentleman would be willing to die on foreign mud for a pointless cause? My father was offered a pardon and he took it. It was off to Waterloo with him. I don't know what happened to him after that. You may have killed him, Queen Elsa.

I was only thirteen when he was taken from me. I had to fend for myself. My fine clothes dirtied and tattered, but I resolved to keep my poise. That was a mistake. I was found by one of the many self-appointed messiahs prowling the streets of England. She lectured me on the sins of prostitution and promised to take me into a reform house. I was shocked. But then, the idea intrigued me. Me, a whore? It was scandalous, but if they were willing to pay. I was hungry, Elsa, so hungry. Hunger drives people to do crazy things.

I did it. I found someone willing. Rather, I found people willing. When I arrived at the party, I was amazed. I had never seen so many fine gentlemen in one place at once. It was all gold! Even the walls smelled of it! They sprayed me with fine perfumes and oils, I was

covered in more wealth than I had ever held. Then I did it. I sucked thirty-seven dicks. Yes, in a row, Queen Elsa. I was dirty. I was unclean. But then came the payment. First, they let me have the spare food. They even gave me some ice to help preserve it. I ate well for a week. Then came the money. It was enough to buy food for a month.

And so I decided that was power. Power was being able to sell myself for another meal. I would've continued like that forever, or at least until my body dried up or I found myself dead in a gutter. It's easy to prey on girls like that. They have nothing. No one will miss them. They're just another body in the streets, just an inconvenience. But then I met Oscar.

I didn't think much of it at first. It started in the usual way. Cash changed hands. We went to his home. He undressed, we laid awkwardly there. That lasted about five minutes before he got back up and redressed. He wasn't feeling it. We decided to have dinner first. It was pheasant. We went back, had sex. It was unsatisfying for the both of us. I went back. It had been fairly typical.

But then he visited again. Rather than sex, he wanted to go to the opera. So we did. And then he came back again and again. We went on many dates in many places. We looked at art, went to restaurants, listened to music, watched comedies. Then one day I decided to ask why.

He told me that it was because he was a liar. I didn't see him for two weeks. I became afraid I had driven him away forever.

Then he came back and confessed everything.

He had come from a very well-to-do family, a noble one in fact. They had arranged a marriage for him. After three years of courtship, however, he and the bride-to-be found that they were utterly incompatible, and broke it off. Disgusted, he had gone to hire a whore. It had been me. At this point, he got down on his knees and asked me to marry him. His family was powerful. Though they

wouldn't approve, family stuck together. Family took care of family. They had connections, they knew many people in the House of Lords. In turn, those people had bought much of the House of Commons. In short, they controlled the government utterly. They could make my past disappear. They could bring me into their world.

I said yes. And now I'm here. But you can never bury the past completely.

Both Elsa and Lady Tamberly stood there for a moment. Then they hugged and Tamberly cried. Elsa kissed her gently on the forehead and wiped the tears dry. Tamberly went back to her knitting and Elsa to her room.

Anna was waiting there, smoking a cigar and twirling a pepper-box revolver idly.

"You asked me why I admire Napoleon," said Anna.

"Yes," replied Elsa.

"He was fat, bald, and really not very nice at times. He really loved power. But you should have heard him talk. He promised us the world and more. Three words, Elsa, how could they be so powerful? Liberty, Egalite, Fraternity! It was a message we were sending the world. More than that, though, it was a promise! A promise to all the downtrodden, the poor, the miserable! You saw Tamberly down there. Empire would bring her peace. Those people... they're good people. Empire would deliver them. That's what Empire meant to me!"

Anna got up and looked at the door, her eyes gazing past it into some foggy future.

"Empire! Just the sound of it makes you want to stand and fight! Empire is a name for liberty! Empire! Where we marched, we made Princes out of paupers and Dukes out of the damned. We upended

the Ancient Regime! We brought power to the powerless and freedom to the enslaved! That is what Empire meant!"

And then she looked into Elsa's eyes.

"And I don't think Empires really die. Look at all the people still trying to be Rome. Rome died like a billion years ago. We still live in the shadow of the Holy Roman Empire. Look at Britain stretching across the globe like a bunch of... birds... birds taped together. So France isn't dead. The French Empire will never die. As long as we carry it in our hearts, it can never die. Liberty! Egalite! Fraternity! Elsa... do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

"I believe in the Resurrection."

Anna walked to the window and threw open the curtains, bathing them both in moonlight.

"Long live the House of Bonaparte."

The shadow of an eagle flitted across the moon.

Oriental

An Indian man was tied to the front of the cannon, his throat hoarse from the begging. He wanted mercy. He would not get it. Treason was a crime punishable by death.

"So... here we are," said Elsa.

"Yup," replied Anna.

"Watching... Indian rebels blown apart by cannon."

"Yessir! Look at that torso fly!"

"That is a dead man."

"Yup."

"Those are limbs scattered about."

"Yup."

"Why can't we ever go somewhere normal and do normal things?"

"What, like a ball? A normal one?"

"Yeah. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"I took you to that one party."

"It was full of your friends, the Bohemian art types."

"Yeah, they're fun. You're not telling me want to go to one of... those parties."

"Wouldn't it be nice? Maybe just once? I know we have balls in Arendelle, but what about theirs?"

"No. You've read *Pride & Prejudice*, right? Watched all those comedies about manners and refinement? Look at all these popular novels dealing with high society and the idle rich."

"So what?"

"Imagine all of that without the witty ironic voice of the narrator poking fun at them. Just passive-aggressive snipes and overly formal garbage."

"But..."

"But I'm taking you to new places! Even if they weren't jerks, and they are, they still wouldn't challenge you because you're a Queen. If they had any problems, they'd just gossip while you were gone. Here you can be real. I want to help you out of your shell. New experiences, Elsa, aren't they grand?"

"I think I could have done without this one."

"It's really no worse than many other methods of execution."

"But we could be having some nice, clean dancing right now. We could have elegant conversations with other fancy people."

"You've seen one formal ball, you've seen them all. I remember my first formal ball. I met a liar named Hans and I nearly died. My next few didn't really do much better. Why keep trying at stupid, dumb things like that? I'm not a fancy person. Their fanciness is all fake anyways."

"Do you think I'm fake too?"

"... N-n-no. No! I... uhhh... damnit. I would never... I... do you want to build a snowman?"

"Not here. Not here."

"Why not?"

"There's been too much death here."

"Aren't you used to it by now?"

"That's the problem. I keep dreaming of you and me playing as kids. We clap, we sing, we freeze nanny's bum. We talk about how we'd defy their norms. We wouldn't be pure as they claimed, we'd have fun, play games. It wouldn't be so innocent. Well, now I'm Queen, and you're my right hand. We travel far, throughout the land. My hands scrubbed raw, they're never clean. The blood does not dry, it never can. We care for the people, but they don't see. I look at her and she looks at me. No one can tell us what a princess should be, because if they try, it's jail or worse. The crown I have outweighs any curse. And little Elsa tells me not to cry. And I can't look back because I know why. Because we know better, you and me. We're damned together, you and me."

Elsa idly kicked a pebble. It went rolling down, and neither could really see where it had stopped.

Maldonia had been founded in blood. Other Empires had held most of India before but each of them had crumbled in time. When Robert Maldon established his Empire, he did it with the intent to stand the test of time. Thus began the reign of Robert I the Philosopher King.

The plan was simple. If there was no longer any conception of a non-unified India, if the princely states could be wiped from memory, then any state that arose would follow his mold. If his descendents lost control, so be it. They were clearly unworthy of rule.

The East India Company's strategy had been to divide and conquer. Maldon intended to enforce a strategy of unity. Recalcitrant ethnic and religious groups would be separated and scattered around the land. His playbook was one of the most ancient in the world. He would bring the Republic to earth. Though it would be impossible to exile or kill all of the old, his agents would track anyone spreading subversive ideals. The past would be erased. All monuments and

records would be destroyed or made to be about him. He would be the heroic God-King who delivered the land from disunity and decay. While children could not be totally taken from their parents to be reared by the state, he established an elaborate system of public education and social activities that would consume most of a child's time, indoctrinating him to serve the state above all. Media of all kinds was heavily controlled, as Plato proscribed. The old identities and cultures had to be eliminated. The new language of India would be Maldaquesh-a blend between Maldon's native Italian and Hindi. Everything was blended together.

This made him fantastically unpopular. He would be subject to 47 attempted assassinations, all failures, and numerous uprisings around the country. But each uprising would cull more and more of the rebellious from the population. Those that survived would be docile and obedient. The nation looked inwards. The terms of trade were biased towards the exporters of raw materials, but British domination had kept India from competing adequately. Under Maldon, the free market worked its magic and gold flowed into the coffers of Maldonia.

Though many Muslims were killed and the others were suppressed, it is hard to kill a belief. They would resurface in time, all the more wily from evading persecution. Many would flee to Indonesia, biding their time.

Using the funds gained from trade, Maldonia underwent a steady process of modernization, upgrading its infrastructure. Roads were linked up, bridges repaired, housing constructed. Most of all, education was improved. It was the centerpiece of the whole plan, after all. Long ago and to the north, Confucius had laid out a set of pacifying ideas during political turmoil. Maldon would now do the same. His *Principles of the Princes and the Orderly Life* would be his defining publication, combining aspects of resurrected mimamsa thought and the Stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius in order to redefine how a good Maldonian ought to live their life. In doing so, he directly attacked the power base of gurus, brahmins, and other

religious leaders. It was intentional, of course. To control such a spiritual continent, Maldon had to assert his own supremacy over their souls.

Although Britain was bloodied, it was not defeated. The terms of the peace allowed them to return to their business interests so long as they competed fairly and paid taxes. One of the main crops produced was opium. China demanded silver and silver alone for its valued tea exports, but Britain had little silver. What it did have was opium. By smuggling opium into China, British traders could acquire tea without the crippling costs of silver. But competition meant that Britain could no longer comfortably acquire tea by selling a minimum of opium. The magic of the market meant that opium production had to be ramped up massively and price needed to plummet. With the loss of India, British eyes turned to Burma. By 1822, the country had been completely annexed, its fields now turned to opium production. The drug infiltrated its way into every corner of Chinese society. In 1828, things came to a head. Several Chinese civilians cornered and murdered a British trader. The Tory government back home howled for blood, partly as vengeance, partly to rally supporters around the flag to boost falling popularity and power. The issue of corrupt voting and a bought out House of Commons was temporarily swept aside as British troops stormed China. The Chinese were helpless before the superior British troops and their naval superiority. Port after port fell effortlessly. Only three years later, the war was over. China was forced open and Hong Kong was ceded. It would be the last hurrah of the Tories. The tide of liberalism was rising and it could not be contained.

Just over thirty years later, Europe would again return to Asia. Maldon would outlive his firstborn son, the throne instead passing to his grandson, a weak-willed man. Luckily, Maldon had plans. There was yet another uprising against him, and the leader of this one was a woman. She expected death. Instead, she got an audience with Maldon himself. His voice was like honey, and he turned her. What better to cure a spineless brat than a woman bold enough to defy an entire Empire? Though his grandson would inherit, the Empress

would be the real power behind the throne. Their firstborn son would be the model of scholarly diligence and charm. Ruthless when provoked but graceful and likable when not. An iron fist in a velvet glove, a son who was everything the people could have dreamed of. The fear he inspired was impressive, only outmatched by the love and devotion of those very same trembling masses. If not for his son, the grandson of the Empress and the great-great-grandson of Maldon, she could have died happy and worry free. The 19th century had been bright for Maldonia.

As it stood, she died asking the question "But what of the boy Naveen?"

United States gunboats opened up Japan. There were markets to be had, and hermit kingdoms would have to be things of the past. A power struggle began soon afterwards. The old order couldn't persist in such a radically different time. The Emperor exercised temporal power for the first time in forever. So much of their culture and philosophy had been based on the Chinese model, but that model was now proving inadequate, as foreigners tore down the dragon. Japan needed to reinvent itself, to conceive a new culture. They had to create a unique identity for themselves. At stake was not only some vague cultural ideal, but their very existence as a state. If they could not adapt to the West while maintaining strong structures of their own, they would die.

Cherry blossoms fall

Rising sun travels westward

Blood and steel rain down.

In China, times were changing. The Opium War would not be the last war of foreign devils. When Napoleon II took the throne of the French Empire, he announced the return of the French Revolution. Its ideals were not dead. France was now the protector of international liberalism. The world would make progress, and if stubborn conservatism resisted, then it would be forced into at

gunpoint. Boys put down their toys and picked up rifles. It was time to shoulder the White Man's Burden. For millennia, China had enjoyed hegemony over East Asia. That sort of status breeds an attitude of arrogance and invulnerability. Napoleon III cast his solemn eyes over the glittering seas, and they came to rest in Asia. What he found disgusted him. Their societies were ancient and just as mired in ancient norms. Their treatment of women was appalling. They would not peacefully accept a foreigner upending their world. A series of letters ensued, Napoleon III working out the details of war with his mother-in-law. A joint force of 50,000 French and German marines stormed Asia. The eastern portion of Indochina fell quickly. Then came China. In Africa, conquest would come by the irresistible maxim of the Maxim gun. For Asia, their magic bullet would be discipline. The European men strode through fire and lead without fear, their foes quickly panicking and fleeing. Their arms were obsolete and their wills unhardened. The magistrates and officers were more accustomed to the passive-aggressive jabs and elaborate social rituals of peacetime. When the men of war came, they fell apart. This time, they would cut for the heart. The reality of Europe could no longer be ignored as they marched throughout China and burned down precious monuments and palaces. It was power, naked and brutal.

The Chinese myth was shattered. Most would cling even more fervently to the sinking ship, turning to reactionary ideas. Anger and rage would spread through the common folk. When the old Emperor died, the new one was not yet ready to take power. Some of the late Emperor's friends were chosen to serve as a regency council. They were generally conservative and traditional men, not the kind China needed. Two Empresses plotted to seize the reins. The regents were rounded up and purged. It was clean and efficient. The task set before Dowager Empress Cixi was daunting indeed. She had to balance the powerful and numerous traditionalists against her loyal reformers, walking a fine line between two kinds of oblivion, one internal, the other external. In the end, she cannot be said to have been equal to the challenge. Her reforms were slow and cautious, her reign ever haunted by her own lack of education and the endless

foes all around. Despite the goading of her reformer allies and her own knowledge that such reforms were necessary, progress was slow. She was well aware that her power was limited by conservative factions in court. Once, she had tried a radical break with tradition without thinking much of it, sending out a favored servant out into the city in defiance of ancient rules. He would die for it and the Empress would mourn deeply. That and the burnt palaces would loom large in her psyche. But for a time, it appeared that China was undergoing a resurgence. The war against France and Corona ended with Cixi's rise to power, and it seemed like real reforms could be made. The reformer Dukes went abroad more and more, becoming the talk of many a ballroom. Toasts were made in the Empress's name. A British man arrived in China and set about reforming tax code. Almost singlehandedly, he would rebuild it, greatly bolstering Qing finances, and performing perhaps the greatest deed any foreigner had ever done for China. Few would remember his name. His heroism was a bureaucratic heroism, not fit for romantic tales.

America had been distracted all the while. Its southern states were stirring trouble. The situation was ripe for conflict. Princess Anna of Arendelle was dispatched to the US to give the South cause for belli. She succeeded admirably. Seward was forced to clean up the Princess's mess. The South was outraged. Not only could the Federal government trample their rights, so could foreigners! War broke out soon afterwards. They had to defend their way of life and their rights, a way of life that incidentally involved mass oppression.

Though the British considered slavery abominable, many of their hearts still laid with the South. Not only did the South output a great deal of cotton for their factories, their way of life was also beautiful. The South considered itself heir to a lost legacy of nobility. Their manors were built in emulation of the Old World. The Southern drawl was just a slower British accent. Their mannerisms and idle wealth were meant to evoke a lost and fleeting grace that was swiftly leaking from the world. The slaves called out in despair and the serfs of distant centuries called back. The South had built itself a perfect fairy tale kingdom, complete with Southern belles as princesses.

It was time for it all to burn.

Anna's advice to the Union generals was short but simple. She recalled the burnt fields of Spain and Russia, the masses of youth mobilized from France, the long years of war. If war was to be waged properly, it had to be waged totally. The Union responded. Atlanta burned.

Confederate hopes had rested with foreign aid. Their British cousins would surely come to deliver them. Unfortunately, those in power disagreed. British diplomats refused to intervene, actively working to smooth over the many tensions between the Union and Great Britain. Though some shipyards would send ships to the South, and some British would volunteer for its armies, Britain itself refused to intervene. Not only were there moral qualms regarding slavery, such an intervention would threaten the balance of power the British so loved. Though many British hearts rested with the South, many French and German hearts burned equally as hot for the Union. In bars in Corona, men jokingly said they would don wings and scale armor and ride to the fields of America as Winged Hussars to bolster the anemic Union cavalry. More importantly, the sympathies of Rapunzel and Napoleon II also rested with the Union. If Britain intervened, the situation would escalate into a world war, and that was totally unacceptable. Garibaldi, the famous Italian nationalist and architect of its unification, almost went to the US to serve as a Union general, only being stopped by a quirk delay. By the time that was over, his countrymen were singing songs of union, and he had business to take care of at home. Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia! The Confederacy was doomed. Without foreign aid, the natural industrial advantages of the North were far too great.

The fairy tale kingdom died. Kaiserin Rapunzel judged it and found it wanting. And lo, it was cast down. Its people wandered its ashes in misery. In the cinders, they saw the broken fragments of their dreams. As Reconstruction took hold and the carpetbaggers came streaming in, the cinders floated away. In a corner of western Austro-Germany, the cinders landed. There was born a girl, a girl named

Cinderella. She was the last phoenix rising from the ashes of a dead age. Her story would be a story of love, triumph, perseverance.

And Weltkrieg. A war unlike all others was coming.

When the Civil War ended, American attention again went to Asia. Its diplomats attempted to gain favored status. Alarmed, Britain hurried to reconfirm its most favored nation status with China. France and Germany, having just fought to impose their ideals on China, soon followed suit. Prussian advisers soon joined British and American diplomats in the ancient halls of China, foreign tongues peeking through the sound of the Orient. Reform after reform followed.

Threats awaited. Japan had also made reforms. It had torn down its old ways and reforged its society, burning away old traditions and ideas. For its reconstruction, it had emerged all the stronger, no longer hampered by the same weight of history that kept China stagnant. In Japan, old had fought new and new had crushed old. Their identity was no longer one cribbed from China, but something fresh and new. It was an identity fitting for a Great Power, a country that wished to claim a place in the sun and rival Europe. China's eyes turned northwards. After all, China and Russia were very similar, were they not? They were both very large powers that had seen better days. They were both autocratic. They still struggled with the weight of the past and the conflict between East and West. Peter the Great could shave the beards sitting on thrones, but he could not shave the beard that lives in the heart. They both were still troubled by archaic lower classes more subjugated and less free than suited the age. Japan had to be put in check. Though Russia considered betraying the agreement internally, the matter would not be pressed. Try as they might, Japan was not able to force a sufficiently large crisis. Such was the true legacy of Lutfisk Man.

And so China appeared triumphant. The century closed and a new one opened. Dowager Empress Cixi died, having controlled China for 41 years. Her death in 1902 was met with great mourning. For the last decade, China and Japan had both been used as examples of successful European intervention. Jules Ferry, the right hand man

of Napoleon II in his last years of life, made many beautiful speeches extolling the virtues of Imperialism. The French had a special genius that had to be spread to the world. French steamers needed periodic resupply which necessitated bases spanning the globe. Most of all, the Empire strengthened France. Its subjects became French, bled French blood. Relations were worsening with Corona, and Ferry knew this. France was the heir of ancient Rome, and its colonies were its conquests. These people would become French and would fight with France against the savage Germanic hordes. French virtues and ideals were uplifting. They would uplift the world and lead it to a new age. Alone, France was weak. With its colonies and their teeming millions, France was a colossus. East Asia was a prime example of how western contact had changed things for the better. At the very least, things had changed for good. In time, all races would rise up. In time, all races could stand together as equals. Both Ferry and Napoleon II would die in the last decade of the 1800s. As the important figures of the 19th century passed away, Europe reflected.

The last century had been a century defined by the interactions between three powerful women and their countries: Empress Cixi of China, Queen Victoria of England, and Kaiserin Rapunzel of Corona. In the background lurked the Empress of India, the Queen of Arendelle, and the Queen of Portugal. It would be called the Woman's Century for a brief time before war dashed such notions. Though it had not been perfect, many agreed that it had been good. Bismarck's complex machinations appeared to be still stable despite his retirement and death. The peace Bismarck had forged under Rapunzel's direction seemed sound. China and Japan had joined the ranks of civilized nations. Progressives crowed with delight. The White Man's Burden had been successful, the people had borne it well. All sorts of wondrous advances in science were being made. Rapunzel had subsidized communications technology, and fruits had been reaped. At the World's Fair, visitors listened in awe as, far away, the children of Cinderella told the story of their now middle-aged mother. The future seemed bright. It was only the calm before the storm.

World war would soon ravage Europe, burning away an entire generation and putting high minded ideals to rest. From the ashes, a new idol would rise. A bundle of sticks enclosing an axe, that would be an emblem to rally the broken and disappointed men whose worlds had been destroyed by war and the failure of the left. Their vaunted ideals had proven hollow. The defeated saw this idol, built temples for it, and prepared to sacrifice their kin and children to it. It would bring them hope, at least for a time. It was something new to believe in. It would not be the war to end all wars. The peace was merely an armistice.

Chinese reforms were illusory. On paper, they appeared perfectly sound. In practice, they were hopelessly bogged down by corruption. Powder stores were filled with dirt instead of gunpowder. State of the art warships were manned by inept crewman and components went unmaintained. Modern arsenals were rife with theft and misreporting. Officials at every level pocketed bits of cash meant to modernize the country, including the Empress herself. The siren call of the burnt palaces had proven too strong. The country seemed to be prospering now, and she slowly took funds away from reform and used them to rebuild the beautiful places that had been lost. It was easy to rationalize. Now that they were strong, they needed to restore the symbols of their strength. They needed to protect their culture. It was just one piece of corruption in a giant stew of it. In time, following the collapse of Qing, it would be used to demonize her. Had the Japanese made an opportunity, the whole structure would have collapsed. As they did not, it shambled on for a time. The Great Depression would provide the push. The Chinese economy collapsed, and with it went the country. Region after region seceded, petty warlords forging their own kingdoms and leading their own warring states. In the chaos, Japan invaded, seizing Manchuria. As World War II broke out, it returned to renew its conquest. As the dust settled, China was again divided into three kingdoms. Manchuria would remain independent after the fall of Japan. In the northwest was Red China. To the south, in China proper, was Nationalist China. Such a situation could not last. One of them would have to seize control and reunite the country. It was the natural way.

Maldonia did not fare much better. Naveen would return from America a changed man. Nevertheless, he had whittled away his early years indulging in pleasure. It was time that could never be recovered. Though Tiana was more responsible, her management was of things on a scale literally one million times smaller than Maldonia. Her experience could not hope to prevail against the challenges of rule. Naveen was crowned Emperor of Maldonia and King of all the Indians in a woefully unprepared state. Still, given time, things would have turned out alright. Naveen was forced to delegate a great deal of power to ministers and bureaucrats. If things had continued longer, no doubt the country would have transitioned into a constitutional monarchy, similar to how the early delegation of the Hanovers eventually changed Britain. Time was not a luxury Naveen had. The Great Depression was coming in all of its splendorous horror. The country began to fall apart as the economy failed. Idle hands do the devil's work, and the many poor contemplated their paths forward. As such men do, they turned to protest. When that failed to change the world, despite the sympathy of the Emperor, they radicalized. The Muslims exiled to Indonesia long ago returned, the years having hardened them. They rallied the low caste Hindus and their mainland Muslim brothers. Revolution began to brew, then boiled over. Naveen attempted to abdicate in order to spare his people the pain of violent struggle. His hopes were dashed. His abdication did nothing, and loyal guards soon rushed to protect the palace as riots began to spread. Naveen and his family would become prisoners in their own home as the country descended into civil war, their fates uncertain as they awaited the victor of the struggle. 45 million people would die to decide Maldonia's fate. If those numbers are added to the deaths of World War II proper, as they sometimes are in the perverse accounting of death, then over 100 million people had died. In the end, the Red Imams, a Communist Muslim radical group, would be triumphant. Naveen and Tiana would be extracted from the country in one of the first operations of a newborn CIA. After almost four decades, Tiana was coming home. By then, the Harlem Renaissance had fizzled and racial tension was again on the rise. The Red Imams would not rest on their laurels. They did not intend to be Soviet puppets like their

Eastern European counterparts. In the 1960s, they would break from the Soviet Union in the Indo-Russo Split. By bankrolling revolutions in Indochina and the Middle East, they established their own sphere of influence, raging against their western-aligned Chinese neighbor. This would not go unnoticed. As revolution spread in the Philippines, Mindanao-based rebels fighting against the Western-aligned government, democratic leaders called on the US to save them and take over again. The US agreed. The Philippines were once again a US territory.

In the end, all of those dreams about the Orient had come to naught.

"Does curry make your tummy sad?" asked Anna.

Elsa didn't respond, her hand idly stirring the curry with a spoon. With a sigh, she let the spoon drop. She got up and walked outside. Anna gasped and rushed out after her sister. A bridge of light connected them as the door swung open.

"Elsa, what's wrong?" asked Anna.

"I keep thinking," replied Elsa.

"Don't do that so much, you'll really end up hurting yourself," said Anna.

"You remember my coronation, right?"

"Yeah, I totally ruined everything. What? Don't look at me like that, you know it's true."

"I keep coming back to it. Examining it. Examining what came after. Looking at decisions."

"Okay, so what? That doesn't sound so bad."

"If Hans won, Sweden would have invaded, citing illegitimacy of rule. Corona would attempt to intervene. War would break out regardless of my presence. What would've happened everything had gone well? I would've stayed isolated my whole life. I wouldn't have been able to properly fulfill my duties. All these what ifs. I keep coming to the conclusion that each alternative is worse."

"That's a good thing, isn't it? It means things worked out. You made the right choices."

"No, it's not. It means I made the right choices and the world is still so ugly and impure. It's still full of so much darkness. I hate it. That's it, isn't it? I hate it. I hate how everything goes right and yet the world is still miserable. I hate how ugly everything is. I hate solving one problem only to have two more pop up."

"So solve those too! I believe in you!"

"I can't! Because I solve those two and four more appear. It's like Hercules and the Hydra except I don't have a brand. I keep stumbling forward hoping that one day things will get better but every day just brings more problems. Don't you see it?"

"Then we'll keep trying! We'll keep trying and trying and eventually the problems will stop and we'll win! We'll win together! Shoot misery in the face and tear its guts out!"

"Why should I believe that's true?"

"Why shouldn't you? Not believing is just going to make you sad and angry. If you keep trying, you can be a hero."

" **Heroes aren't real**," hissed Elsa.

"It doesn't matter. You still need to believe in them. We all do. If we don't believe in heroes, what else is there?"

"Why should I believe in something fake?"

"Because we can make it real if we just try hard enough and keep going day by day."

"I can't stop myself from thinking... in the end... we're going to kill each other, aren't we?"

"Elsa! Please don't say that."

"Because everything is one big joke."

"Stop. Never say that."

"And it's not a very funny one either."

"I'll keep fighting for you."

"Ha."

"I'll be faster than a bullet."

"Ha. Ha."

"Stronger than a train."

"Ha. Ha. Ha."

"If you ask me to jump, I'll ask how high. Just stay with me. Believe."

"We're perfect for each other, aren't we? Two sociopaths. Fucked in the head. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven."

"Then we can help each other. We can beat any problem because we understand each other."

"Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father."

"Elsa! Please, stop talking this crazy talk."

"I wish I could. I wish everything could go back to the old days so we could play together and not worry about the world. I wish we weren't born princesses. But I was coronated. I bit the apple and we were cast out of the garden by the Eastern guards and their flaming swords."

"Then we'll make the best of it. Together. I love you. We can earn a happy ending even if one isn't waiting for us."

The dying sun cast its rays over a Mughal fort, the defenses gleaming in the golden rays. Tears fell softly into the red earth. The sky was a gentle copper lit by star flame, a tapestry woven each day anew over the land. Anna ran her fingers through Elsa's hair. Birds sang their happy dirges. Collapse. Decay.

Rebirth. The sun also rises. The bulls run.

Tomorrow they would continue on their tour. Elsa slept a dreamless sleep that night. After all, Anna was right. Even if heroes were fake, even if they were impossible and laughable, they still needed them. So they would keep on. Tomorrow would be a brighter day. After every dark, a dawn.

Painting

Author Notes: With thanks to Eroticist.

Elsa stared at the walls around her. On three of them were massive Polandball murals. Her favorite was the western one, a depiction of all the countries of the world in Polandball format with humorous remarks by them. She called it a Polandball Map of the World. It was not an imaginative name.

Of course, painting had never grabbed her. In her youth, she would start paintings, but then would get wrapped up in the logistics of the scene. Why was the awning there? Why that building? Would such a configuration be optimal? She would go over both artistic perspective and the perspective of the hypothetical figures living there until the latter fully engrossed her, finally reducing a work of art to draft work followed by the construction of a perfectly scaled model village or city. As a very young child, she had rendered these in ice. As she grew older and more scared of her powers, she turned to standard materials. As she settled into the dull monotony and endless responsibilities of adulthood, she returned to ice. It was simple and limitless. Nevertheless, the many years using standard materials had taught her a great deal about materials science and construction, making her models all the more realistic. Still, a painter she was not. Blueprints they were, not paintings. Dry and lifeless.

She looked at the various balls again. There was Polandball, but that erred more on the side of ridiculousness. Once, some British diplomats had been over. After the ball, they stumbled across her mural. They had wondered why Britain wore a top hat monocle. She didn't have a good answer so she gave them top hats and monocles instead, and that seemed satisfactory.

That sort of effortless conflict resolution was why her father had always said she was graceful and a natural diplomat. Then again, he

said a lot of things. On Machiavelli, he advised her to be like an onion. She had been confused.

"You must be like an onion because small children cry when you cut them."

Somehow, that hadn't helped. Over the years, Elsa had slowly realized that her father had not been a clever man.

There was a noise from outside. Noises meant Anna was near. She entered the hallway.

As she suspected, Anna was there, stuffing her face with grapes from a decorative fruit bowl.

"Anna, what on earth are you doing?" asked Elsa.

"Have you seen Mrs. Miller?" asked Anna.

"No. Why are you eating from that fruit bowl?"

"Why wouldn't I be eating from the fruit bowl?"

"They're decorative. You're not supposed to eat the fruit."

"Pff. If they're not supposed to be eaten from, then why is the fruit so delicious? Gotta use your head," said Anna as she rolled her eyes and popped another grape in her mouth.

"Right."

"Hey. Hmmm. Hey. I smell fear," said Anna, sniffing the air with suspicion.

"What does fear smell like, exactly?"

"Sweat and urine!" chirped Anna as she strode towards a curtain.

Behind it was the famed Mrs. Miller. She quite looked like a penguin huddling up on an ice floe for protection against the killer whales, or perhaps a field mouse in an owl's claws.

"Mrs. Miller! Hooray! Now I can continue my reign of friendship," said Anna.

"Isn't the third word in that phrase usually terror?" asked Elsa.

"Not with me," replied Anna.

Mrs. Miller was wearing a bright and flowery dress, something that most ordinary folks would call festive. It reminded Elsa of the bright colors animals would wear to convince predators they weren't worth the time, struggle, and danger. Futile, of course. Anna wasn't an animal. On her head was a hat covered in fruit. Her knees shook-33 years on the good earth could not have prepared the lady Miller for the terrible fate that awaited her.

"How are you doing?" asked Anna.

"Wonderful! Splendid!" said Mrs. Miller.

Anna smiled. Then she took an apple from Mrs. Miller's hat and bit it. Mrs. Miller watched, appalled, as Anna finished the apple, tossed the core aside, and retrieved another fruit from the hat. After about a minute, she noticed Mrs. Miller's dismay.

"Ahh. Oh. Ohhhhh. I'm so sorry. It is your hat after all," said Anna.

Anna plucked a strawberry from the hat and handed it to Mrs. Miller.

"Why I never!" objected Mrs. Miller.

Anna squinted.

"Why you never... what? I don't understand," said Anna, rubbing her chin.

"I-I-I-I," stammered Mrs. Miller.

"You what? I'm confused," said Anna.

"Are you always so outrageous?"

"Huh...?"

"This must be one of the worst things," said Mrs. Miller in a huff.

"Not really. Did I ever tell you about the time I ripped out someone's eyeballs and testicles and put his eyes where his balls used to be and his balls where his eyes used to be? I ripped out someone's eyeballs and testicles and put his eyes where his balls used to be and his balls where his eyes used to be. Also, this one time, there was this really cute pony. I mean, really really really cute. I just wanted to pinch his chubby little cheeks! Horse cheeks. So adorable! So I told it I would feed it some sugar, but then I didn't have any sugar. It was so disappointed. It was a sad horse. Super duper sad horse. And then I just felt like such a stinker for letting a cute pony down."

Mrs. Miller gaped in horror.

"You should close your mouth, a fly might get in there," said Anna.

Very helpful advice. Elsa cocked an eyebrow.

"Read any good books lately?" asked Anna.

"No. In fact, I'm totally illiterate! And blind. Did I mention I was blind?" said Mrs. Miller.

"Wow, that sucks. I love seeing things. In fact, I'd definitely put seeing things in the top three things I like to do."

"Anna, I think you should go have a conversation with Kristoff about foot size. Run along now," interjected Elsa.

"What, really? But I'm having a nice conversation with Mrs. Miller," said Anna.

"Sure, but I'm sure Kristoff would love some company," replied Elsa.

"Alrighty. You look sorta down by the way. Turn that frown upside down! Remember what dad said: you've got to be like an onion because small children cry when you cut them."

Anna jumped up and down, did a little spin, then zoomed off, her war medals clanking and clinking as she sped away.

Elsa cleared her throat. Iron fist.

"Mrs. Miller," said Elsa.

"How dare you do this to me?" asked Mrs. Miller.

"Do what? Have a top-ranking military official, war hero, and powerful noble grace you with her presence, a honor only made greater because she is my very own sister?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"My husband will be hearing of this!"

Elsa was sure he would. He was trained to handle abuse and to stay collected under pressure. Diplomats were meant to be as close to living embodiments of national interests as possible. Of course, deals were always negotiated by people. People had weaknesses.

"And then what?"

"And then reprisals! Problems!"

"For what? For being an accommodating host? What would the commoners say when they learn a trade deal fell through for no

reason? No, that won't be happening."

"You can't do this."

"You're stuck here until the trade negotiations are over."

Stuck here and within her power. No, she didn't know Mr. Miller's weaknesses. But his wife would. His wife wasn't trained to handle stress well. Who would bother? Elsa could see the wheels turning in the woman's brain. Mr. Miller had received a very valuable gift of fine wine this morning. He was an irritable drunk. Enter the nagging wife. They have to finish. They have to leave now. Sleep deprivation? Pressure to conclude early? Either way, his judgment would be impaired. Velvet glove.

Year after year, Arendelle was blessed with endless sustained growth and outrageously good terms of trade. It was almost miraculous.

Almost. Father was wrong, as he often was. He had meant well, but he was wrong nonetheless. Elsa wasn't a good diplomat. Anna was.

Mrs. Miller left in quite the tizzy.

Elsa looked around. Nobody here. Nobody there. Not a pair of eyes in sight. She leaned over the fruit bowl and took a grape. Juicy with a hint of tart. Maybe Anna was right after all.

A mirror was hanging in the hallway. She looked into it and saw a man behind her. She turned around and nodded.

"Queen Elsa. We've found his family," said the man.

"Good. Where were they hiding?" asked Elsa.

"A rural parish in the north. A little snowbird rooted them out for me," said the man with a smirk.

"Tell him that we have his family and we're willing to make a prisoner exchange for Agent Karlssen. When he shows, shoot him. Once the head is gone, arresting the followers should be easy."

"And his family?"

"Shoot them afterwards."

The man smiled and walked away. After he left, Elsa walked over to a cabinet and opened it up. Inside was a bottle of vodka, high-quality stuff from the private stills of the Potocki family.

It was a gift from Her Majesty, the Queen Regnant of Corona, Defender of the Protestant Faith, Head of the North German Federation, Grand Princess of Greater Poland, Grand Princess of Lesser Poland, Archduchess of Warsaw, Duchess of Prussia, Duchess of Cleves, Margrave of Brandenburg, Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Count of Pomerania, Count of Pomerania, Count of Krakow, Count of Poznan, Protector of Aland, Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor of the French Empire, Field Marshal First Class of the Coronan Army, and Grandmaster of the Order of the Iron Cross, or Cousin Punzie for short.

The quality of the drink was almost as high as the political acumen of the family itself, which is to say amongst the best in all Europe. The Potockis, after all, had weathered hundreds of years of history and not only survived, but thrived. Dynasties rose and fell, the country grew, boasted, was partitioned, and then was reunified, and through all of that, there had been Potockis. Few szlachta families had survived, let alone prospered. Only ten years ago, there had been a major revolt by disgruntled nobles. Their status had fallen greatly, and many had become nobles in name only, living like common folk. Outraged, they had attempted to seize Krakow and start a revolution. It would be a grave mistake. Rapunzel had abolished many landholder privileges under the pretense of egalitarianism during the first two decades of the century, and the common folk had responded with deep gratitude. Rather than seeing the rebellion as a blow for freedom and the Polish identity, they saw the nobles as

tyrants attempting to reassert an oppressive regime. What started as a revolt turned into a massacre, and it was inflicted on the would-be revolvers. The Potockis had not been one of those foolish families. While others were torn apart by the mob, the Potockis had ingratiated themselves with their new masters. Now a Potocki was Minister of Finance. Their fame was so great that a saying of the time went "If you want power, seek the ear of Chancellor Bismarck. But if you want happiness, make friends with the Potockis".

Elsa took a swig. It wasn't enough to numb the pain, but it wasn't meant to. It just had to dull it. The pain was there for a reason, after all. The pain in her heart meant she still had one. That alone made it a good pain. The pain was a reminder that she was still human and still alive. That life wasn't just a hell of her own devising, an ironic afterlife that she so richly deserved. Elsa closed her eyes and felt the hot needling of conscience smash against the iron walls of necessity, the alcohol surging through her veins and making her body light even as her mind was dragged earthward.

She looked in the mirror again. Icy eyes stared daggers back at her. The eyes of a witch who would have no excuses for Saint Peter when she walked up to the pearly gates. So be it. Indeed, it was a good pain.

"BOO!"

Elsa opened her eyes. Anna had returned.

"Bet I scared you a little, didn't I?" said Anna as she punched Elsa playfully on the shoulder.

"How'd your talk go?" asked Elsa.

"Oh you know, same old same old."

"Sounds nice."

"How has your day been going?"

"Usual lineup."

"Hmm. Maybe we should do something fun to perk you up?"

"Maybe later."

"I saw you working on a painting in the other room. Maybe we could go work on that?"

Elsa shrugged. The slow buzzing in her head drowned out any objections. It would be a nice break, wouldn't it?

The canvas was large but mostly empty. It felt fitting. Anna scrunched up her face and looked at it.

"Hmmm. Sure is big and huge! What were you going to paint?" said Anna.

"I don't know."

"Got any ideas?"

"No."

"Well, we'll make it up as we go then! It'll be like an adventure."

Elsa took a brush and made a few tepid strokes. Anna bit her lip in anticipation. Elsa looked at the canvas for several moments, doing nothing.

"Alright. I have no idea what I'm doing," said Elsa.

"Just think of something you like and paint it."

"Draw something you're passionate about! Something you really care about."

Elsa continued to stare at the canvas.

"I'll help you," said Anna. "I'll help you."

Elsa felt Anna press herself against her and embrace her with her thick, powerful arms. She took Anna's hand and wrapped the taut steel cables of her love around her. Anna's perfumed scent intoxicated her; her head swum in rich cinnamon sweetness, exotic as an Araby bazaar. Elsa's hand passed blindly across the blank expanse. A puff of breath, hot against her cheek, enticed a pool of blood to blush her fair skin pink. A soft moan escaped Elsa's lips as a jolt shot up her spine as Anna's hand weaved through her hair and brushed strands away from her eye and left to take her hand again. They moved in unison, Elsa's arm making daubs of color and light appear out of nothing. She panted and sweat as the miracle of creation overwhelmed her, but then came the hug; the rock on which she would ever be steady. She closed her eyes and the heaving of her sister's chest against her back, the steady breathing lulled her into a serene haze.

And in that foggy twilight slumbering, a voice called out, and she knew not if it was hers or her sister's. Indeed, it seemed like it could both or neither. But she was in her sister's embrace, was being guided and held. It was safe here.

From the doorway, Kristoff watched.

"Hey Sven. This is pretty hot. Do you they'll do it?" asked Kristoff.

"I dunno Kristoff. Maybe we should keep watching and find out," said Sven.

"Yeah, that sounds like a plan. Hmm. Isn't it wrong for this to be happening?"

"What? Incest lesbians."

"Yeah. I feel like this is against some natural laws and moral codes."

"Clearly this is the release they need to find peace. It's cathartic."

"Yeah, I really should stop-what? No, you're getting your role mixed up. You're supposed to talk me down."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"You could encourage it! Anna needs love, you know. If you enacted a love embargo, well, you see where I'm going."

"Excuse me? First of all, what's an embargo?"

"You just need to become very cold and distant. Just like how a country will naturally find alternative sources of trade, your wife will look for alternative sources of love. And we both know that sex isn't necessarily love. She can get sex. But who else loves her? She'll naturally gravitate to the other important person in her life: Elsa. Then incest lesbians in full force."

"I think Elsa's been a bad influence on you."

"Nonsense. I'm just a figment of your imagination and also your best buddy."

"Alright, tell me a recurrence equation for $g(n+2)=ag(n-1)+bg(n)+c$."

Sven scratched out the answer with his hooves.

"See, I couldn't have done that. In fact, I don't even know what that means," said Kristoff.

"If one set of boobs is good, two sets is better. Therefore lesbians is best."

"I guess I'll just wait and see," said Kristoff.

Emotion and feeling racing through her veins. The acrid smell of gunsmoke. Lavender mist. Maggots crawling through wormy flesh. Lips caressing each other. Hands stroking hips. The metallic copper of blood, yours or another's. Tens of thousands dead from cholera. The laughter of a child saved from disease. Anna squinting, her depth perception impaired with only one eye. Paint dripping softly downwards. Her parents weeping softly. The wailing screams of creatures not quite men before they meet an icy end. The sky is burning. The earth is burning. Affix bayonets. Stroke. Counterstroke. Parry. Riposte. Negative space. Lines striking action.

The soft murmur of a stanza.

Seek out-less often sought than found-

A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;

Then look around, and choose thy Ground,

And take thy rest.

Confident lines. Confident strokes. Eyes with no fear in them. Boots marching into fire. The line must be bold. The line must charge, the line must break them before they break it. Hapsburgs gazing over oriental gates to ward against plague. Moaning cities as tens of thousands succumb to cholera. The laughter of a child delivered from death's clutches. The gurgle of rushing water as floodgates open on modern aqueducts. Colors. The colors of a flag waving in the breeze. Follow the colors forward into battle. Colors of different races. Most of all, red. Guts spilled over a grassy green plain. The chiaroscuro of corpses.

Towers of gold reaching towards the sun. Towers of silver to defy the moon. Steel men living in an age of steel. Coal and rivets. The call of the telegraph and the retort of the cannon. Coming home. The glittering of opulent dresses on vapid people. Why have a ballroom with no balls? Why have a ballroom at all? Why even have balls? Screaming. Pointlessness. Breaking down. Everything breaking

down. Life was short, so short. Lolling of a tongue, the jaw having been blown to bits by a bullet. Brains leaking out of the back of a skull. A rotting corpse white with molds and maggots.

Then the torch lit still. Follow the light. A sword never to be sheathed again. Apples in a bowl. Freedom.

Her eyes were open but they didn't see. It was only now that she was able to look.

At the upper right was Lord Byron, cutting an imposing figure in the painting. He was at the head of the charge. Around him, Turks scattered. Soldiers were running from behind. The rays of the sun peeked in through the barricades, suffusing it in a light pink. In the distance, Macedonian wheat fields swayed in the wind.

"Who taught you how to paint?" asked Elsa.

"Eh, a bit here, a bit there. I learned a little from our tutors, but I never paid much attention to them. It was David that really got me started, but honestly, most of it came during the war. You see that man there," said Anna, pointing to one of the soldiers in the painting.

"Yes," replied Elsa.

"That's... that's Lejeune. We painted together. It was a hobby, something to keep your mind busy while on campaign. He wanted to teach at the Ecole when everything was over. He led a battalion behind enemy lines in Portugal. We were getting overrun when suddenly the enemy army shattered. But he didn't come back. Over here is Lasalle, that's Ney..."

Anna silently mouthed names as she traced her finger through the air, pointing at different figures. Elsa watched.

"Just for once, I wanted you to see what I see. I wanted... want you to see how beautiful it could all be. Not just the grime, but the struggle. Freedom, Elsa, freedom! I was locked up too. Nobody

should have to live like that. Aux armes, citoyens, formez vos bataillons, marchons, marchons! Qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons! Aux armes, citoyens! Maybe I'm blind, Elsa, blind or crazy, but freedom is an idea worth fighting and dying for. Sit with me a while, please. Try to see it with me."

"The soldier in the far left corner over there. That soldier doesn't have a face."

Anna took a deep breath.

"Yeah. I need to ask you a favor. If you outlive me, I want you to paint my face in that spot. I'll do the same if... I outlive you."

"Okay."

"I want you to promise me that."

"I promise."

"But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:

My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,

And my frame perish even in conquering pain,

But there is that within me which shall tire

Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire."

In 1849, Anna finished *Lord Byron in Macedonia* .

"Matejko did a good job, didn't he?" said Rapunzel.

"He did, though I detect just the slightest hint of insincerity in this painting. It's just a feeling I have," deadpanned Bismarck.

"What? Is my illustrious ancestor too handsome for you?"

"Perhaps it's the complete disregard for protocol or the sinister undertones of the work," said Bismarck.

"Are you insinuating our good friend Matejko, the Polish nationalist, might chafe a bit at being kept by a family he sees as bringing about the downfall of the Commonwealth? Oh, perish the thought," said Rapunzel with mock offense dripping from her voice.

"Heavens me, please forgive me your Imperial Highness," replied Bismarck with equally thick fake courtesy, prostrating himself.

"You are forgiven for now! One more offense and clearly I'll have to ship you to the political prisons! I mean, who could possibly think such a painter could think lowly of us? Madness, I say. Would I really hang the painting of someone like that in the palace? Wouldn't that be a blatant flaunting of power, to have the works of a subversive held in the very highest of places without fear? Hmm. That would be downright mean-spirited."

"Indeed."

Rapunzel sniffed a nearby flower deeply. Some pollen wafted up her nose and she sneezed. She brought an arm up to rub her nose and smiled. Across the centuries, Duke Albrecht smiled as well.

"What's the Swede's favorite winter game? Deluge. So there's Norway we'll show any mercy," said Rapunzel.

"I see..? These jokes are quite awful," said Bismarck.

"I know, I'm totally going to shell for this. I think I might have to include these in the field handbook. The enemy will accuse of war crimes as we storm their defenses, and you know what the Kingdom Guards will say?"

"What?"

"Guilty as... CHARGED! But it doesn't matter because you're fired! Howitzer? I don't even **know** her! And when they ask me why? Well, I Gotland! Revenge will be Swede."

"Kaiserin Rapunzel, I must respectfully ask why you are subjecting me to this."

"Why? Well... I'm feeling... PUNZY. Ha."

Bismarck smirked and then doubled over laughing, slapping his knee as he guffawed. Rapunzel raised an eyebrow and smirked a smug little smirk.

Knocking came from the door. Rapunzel opened it.

"Anna! So glad you could make it," said Rapunzel.

"What else am I going to do?" asked Anna.

"Errr... ummm... I don't know? Travel the world with Kristoff."

"I already did that, and did that in a way cooler way," said Anna as she started to mime a tour guide. "Did you know that the cornerstone of the Neue Schloss was laid on September 3rd, 1746? Did you know that pillar over there is called the Mercury Pillar? Why yes, I raised a flag over it decades ago. And the food. The locals won't serve you the good stuff easily. Fake tacos in a hotel lobby can't compare to morning guatitas after a hard night of drinking and sparring with the boys."

"Oh come on, it's got to be at least a little fun."

"Slumming it in a trade port is nothing when you've been with Earl Elgin to the heart of the Forbidden City. Tried hunting big game, didn't do anything for me. I've hunted cannibal tribals in the Dark Continent and gutted abbos for Aussie settlers. A few big cats? That's just... pfff."

"So you're not liking retirement then?"

"Can I have my job back? I'll be good, I swear. No taking your armies on Mr. Napoleon's Wild Ride this time, no siree!"

"Nope."

"You're killing me here."

Rapunzel sighed.

"Look, you're not going to be around forever, you know. We've got to put Moltke through his paces," said Rapunzel.

"Yeah. I know. It just hurts wandering the palace halls again. I've already spent enough time there. I think I need to build a nice manor somewhere, maybe get some lawn gnomes and one of those funny novelty fountains," replied Anna.

At this point, Moltke walked in.

"Speaking of the devil, there's the man of the hour," said Rapunzel.

"How go the preparations?" asked Bismarck, eyeing Moltke warily.

"Good," said Moltke.

"The British will be concerned with their own affairs and will not interfere... for the moment. The Russians have been stirred from the stupor. If you are truly confident that you can repulse an Austrian counterstrike, and I ask you to be truly confident in such a thing before committing an answer, then 1871 will be a brief window of opportunity for us," said Bismarck.

"I am," replied Moltke.

"Moltke! How does it feel being a Field Marshal?" asked Rapunzel.

"I am honored," said Moltke.

"As well you should be. It is an honor. You have been entrusted with a great deal of power now. A general leads but a marshal commands, do you understand? The fate of the invasion now rests on your shoulders, and I hope you are now aware of that fact," said Bismarck.

"I am aware," replied Moltke as he shot Bismarck a look. Bismarck scowled.

"Lady. Gentlemen. Let's get down to business. Tell me about our armies," said Rapunzel.

"We have 145,000 troops lined up in Arendelle province and our rail infrastructure is far superior to Sweden's. The Russians are able to send 20,000 men and material support to us. If necessary, a second force of 60,000 will be deployed from Finland. 100,000 men are guarding the border to Austro-Germany and can be redeployed far faster on our rails than the Austrians can maneuver. I am confident that the quality and training of our soldiers far outmatches the enemy. Taczanowski is leading the border guard, von Goeben the Russian force, and I will command the main force at Arendelle personally," said Moltke.

"Excellent. It sounds like you have the matter well under control," said Rapunzel.

"I try," replied Moltke.

Rapunzel nodded and smiled. Moltke folded his hands behind his back.

"How is the home front?" asked the Kaiserin.

"The people are practically spitting fire in righteous fury. Sienkiewicz's work has taken well to the Opera stage. To be quite frank, *The Deluge* has captivated the minds of the people. They would be willing to do anything to Sweden now," reported Bismarck.

"And I trust *With Fire and Sword* is not performed as much by our fine operatic singers, of their own volition of course," said Rapunzel with a wink.

"Oh, of course. Who wants to watch some Ukrainians being savages? It's nothing compared to the palpable villainy of Radziwill," quipped Bismarck.

"What about the press?" asked Anna.

"What about them?" said Rapunzel.

"The press. Mr. Reuter is sure to get the word out. He has eyes and ears everywhere. What are people going to say?" continued Anna.

"Please don't talk about that jerk Reuter. He thinks he's important just because he can cable a few people and call on his connections," said Rapunzel.

"He is important though. The press has power," said Anna.

"Well, maybe it shouldn't! Why do so many people want a strong press anyways? It only makes everything so complicated."

"Because people want to know things," said Anna.

"They don't need to know things. Kaiserin knows best. Kaiserin will take care of them. All this press business does is put scaremongering and wild, crazy notions in people's heads."

"But he's growing stronger."

"I know. I miss the old days. It was a small world back then. No telegraphs for the pesky snoops. It was easy to control what got around. Now a message is out and halfway around the world before you can even blink. It's like the world has become a village and the town gossip won't shut up."

"Times have changed."

"Yeah, they have. You know, I got a message from the US. 'Though we appreciate your support and recognize that you have been and continue to be an ally to the US, a friend to freedom, and a fighter for liberty across the globe, your hostile attitude towards the press concerns us. A strong Fourth Estate is vital to the functioning of a healthy nation.' Can you believe them? A strong press. The Fourth Estate? They call it the Fourth Estate! Ridiculous."

Rapunzel suddenly doubled over and started to cough violently, her throat hacking and scratching. Moltke and Anna moved to steady the Kaiserin while Bismarck examined her. She moved her hand to cover her mouth and when the fit had subsided, she noticed the blood on it.

"Hoo boy, that's not good. That's... that's probably a problem. This just means we need to finish quickly," said Rapunzel.

"Are you okay?" asked Anna.

"I can send for the physician," said Bismarck.

"No, it's nothing. I'm fine. Affairs just need to be put in order. Very soon we will be speaking of Sweden in the past tense. Or should I say, North Prussia?" said Rapunzel.

"Yes, of course," said Bismarck.

"Your will shall be done," said Moltke.

"I'm worried about you," said Anna.

"Don't. Please, I wouldn't want to cause you stress. Look, I just need to finish this. I'll leave a peaceful Europe behind. All the powers will have to check each other. A Europe with Corona at the forefront. My son will inherit a strong country and a proud people. A people with dignity. A Corona with culture blooming on every front. Just a little more time and everything will be in order. I can last that long. After that? Well... every mother has to step down sooner or later. I guess I

chose later rather than sooner. But now later is soon and then is now."

The mortar fell away in tiny chips and plaster dust clouded the air.

If you wish to die in Corona, be a journalist. If you wish to do journalism, be an artist. Such was the wisdom of the old spinsters. For the Kaiserin was above the law, but the artists were above even the Kaiserin. Rapunzel had been a great patron of the arts. Even when those she supported metaphorically spat in her face by mocking her or her family, she continued to fund them. When Sienkiewicz compared historical Polish rebellions to overthrowing her regime, she turned a blind eye. It was this behavior that ultimately won him over and made him a fervent believer in the regime. Him and many like him turned to various cultural and scientific endeavours under the Kaiserin's watchful benevolent eye. As the saying went, Rapunzel found Corona a city of lanterns and left it a city of lights.

And the portrait of her stared down at the Empress.

There were others as well. This would only be an interim home for these paintings. Certainly, they could no longer live in the palace.

Queen Victoria, Rex Imperator of the British Empire. Queen Elsa, greatest ruler Arendelle had ever seen. Emperor Napoleon, a symbol of the unbreakable strength of France.

All contributors to her august bloodline. If she bled, did she bleed purple?

The cathedral shook again, dislodging more chunks of the ceiling.

It was time. The Archbishop was waiting with the regalia of state. It was time for a coronation. Not hers, of course.

Little Joanna fidgeted and whined softly. She was too young for this. But what could be done?

The Crown of Charlemagne waited for them.

"Nana? What's happening? Are we going to die?" asked Joanna.

"Shhhh, darling. Everything is going to be okay. Stay strong," said Empress Marie I.

"I miss Papa," said Joanna.

De Gaulle grunted. Marie nodded and stood by the altar.

"I'll be right here, okay? Your grandma is right here for you. Don't be scared," said Marie.

"What do I do next?" asked Joanna.

"The nice priest will show you," said Marie.

Too soon. Far too soon. Had their lines failed so fast? In the end, they had not been prepared.

"I ask that the rights of the Church be maintained today," intoned Suhard.

"Y-y-yes, they shall," stuttered Joanna.

"We don't have time for this," said De Gaulle. "Time is of the essence. We must skip to the meat of the ceremony."

"This is a sacred rite," replied the Archbishop.

"Nothing is sacred to the Nazis, and their tanks fast approach. Move on, Suhard," said De Gaulle.

Suhard clenched his jaw but turned back to Joanna.

"I anoint thee with the holy oil in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," said Suhard, sprinkling Joanna.

The Archbishop then buttoned up Joanna's little vest and put her sweater back on. Then she was given the smallest tunic they had, which, nevertheless, was three sizes too big. She was engulfed within it.

"Where am I? Help!" cried Joanna.

The Minister of the Interior pulled her head through the neck hole. She was stuck in a mountain of cloth.

"We will dispense with the 'unnecessary' prayers," said Suhard. "Let these hands be anointed with holy oil, as kings and prophets have been anointed and as Samuel did anoint David to be king, that thou mayst be blessed and established as king over this people, whom the Lord, thy God, hath given thee to rule and govern, which he has vouchsafed to grant, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, three in person and one in unity, be blessed and praised, now and for evermore. Amen."

The Crown of Charlemagne was placed on Joanna's head by the Archbishop and the assembled ministers. Her knees quaked under the weight.

The Archbishop kissed Joanna on the forehead.

"May the King live forever," he shouted. The others joined him in his cry.

"So it is done," muttered De Gaulle. "Let the archtraitor Petain do what he wishes. The French empire lives on."

"The ceremony is only symbolic. Rest assured, this 'succession crisis' will not go away just because the heir has been crowned. We must fight," said Mandel.

"Fight we will. Suhard. Suhard, I give you one last chance to renounce your cowardice. Come with us," said De Gaulle.

"The invaders will still have some semblance of good Catholic values left in them, no matter how blackened their hearts are by fascist propaganda," replied Suhard. "I believe they can be persuaded. I will stay."

"Fool. Men, put Reims to the torch. If they wish to conquer France, let them conquer ashes!" ordered De Gaulle.

Reims burned.

Poland

Author Notes: Plenty of people have asked about the exact timeframes of things. I would have preferred to answer all questions in story, but I've been updating slower than I would like. I will provide a timeline and lay out the chronology of the fic at the end, rest assured.

" There are no Poles left, only Prussians in denial. Let the darkness take me." - Last words of Pilsudski

" Himmler? I was wrong. They are animals, every single one of them. Berlin is infested totally with these debased creatures. Though they hoot and wear the skins of civilization, they do so without any sort of understanding. Everything north and east of Berlin is completely subhuman. They are brutes to the core and extermination is the only answer to these Slavs and their pretensions at proper Aryan status. Nothing Germanic remains in them." - Adolf Hitler

" The difficulty in understanding the Coronan is that we do not take cognizance of the fact that he is not a European, but an Asiatic, and therefore thinks deviously. We can no more understand a Coronan than a Chinaman or a Japanese, and from what I have seen of them, I have no particular desire to understand them, except to ascertain how much lead or iron it takes to kill them. In addition to his other Asiatic characteristics, the Coronan has no regard for human life and is a slave and cynic obsessed with power." - George S. Patton

" Because there is nothing left. Your men exterminated the old Prussians utterly and completely. What I see now is nothing more than a monster. It is a monster that slays my friends, devours their flesh, steals their women, then skins the corpses to wear as clothing. And when this skin-stealer comes to my house and tells me to call him the same name as my old friend, can there be anything but war?" - Captured Lithuanian noble

"Poland has been a source of trouble for over five hundred years." - Franklin D. Roosevelt

"I was raised Catholic, but I'm constitutionally required to be Lutheran. So if anyone asks, I'm Lutheran." - Eugene III Frederick

"Aaron."

No response.

"Aaron."

The Queen frowned.

"It's Agdar," corrected the King.

"We're not in public anymore. Must you continue this ridiculous farce?" asked the Queen.

"Farce? Farce! This is what you call the names and the traditions of your ancestors?"

"Yes, precisely. My ancestors, not yours. And my very distant ancestors at that."

"And these traditions were reinstated to give us legitimacy. These traditions keep Arendelle alive!"

"No, the armies of Thom... -Frederick keep Arendelle alive. Prussian steel and the timber trade keep Arendelle alive. Runestones do one thing and one thing only: sit there. Quite frankly, I'd rather we do away with these things."

"They're a symbol of Norseness."

"Norseness? Norseness? You're a damn German. Your forefathers were German. Your House is German. It's Germans all the way down. The only thing Norwegian about you is your name, and that's

just the way it is because your distant ancestors wanted to curry local favor. I don't see why you cling to it."

"Exactly. It's the only thing I have."

"Have for what?"

"Legitimacy."

"Legitimacy? Honey, your family has sat on this piece of land for almost three hundred years. That's ten generations and then some. You don't think that counts as legitimacy?"

"No."

"Really now. What are you expecting, an angry viking mob? Some ridiculous axe-toting army calling for your head?"

"Maybe."

"And some sort of blood pedigree or silly name will stop them."

"... Yeah?"

"You're being ridiculous. Very well, if this slaving horde comes for us, they'll have to go through me. If blood really matters, then I have enough pedigree to spare! I am Idunn Ascania, Countess of Trondelag, descendent of St. Olaf and the Fairhairs through the Jarls of Orkney and the granddaughter of Olaf, bearer of the blood of the Estridsens, and, I might add, a branch more senior than those phony Westergards. Rawr. Feel better, sweetie?"

"A little bit."

"Why are you so worried?"

The King started to answer but caught the words in his gullet before they could squeak out. Still, Idunn was perceptive.

"You were going to say Elsa," said the Queen.

"I was not going to say Elsa," objected the King.

"You were going to say Elsa. What's wrong with her?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No. She's a perfectly healthy, normal baby girl."

"With... ice powers. Magic ice powers."

"What's a little magic between family?"

"It's not just between family. It's a matter of the utmost importance! I mean, think of all the people that will see. Servants alone is dozens."

"So buy them off if that's such a problem. Hush them up."

"Coin only buys silence for so long."

"Then they can silenced permanently if you're going to be a such a worrywart. But I really don't think that will be necessary."

"I'm a terrible father. I'm a terrible father! What am I even doing?"

"... Screaming?"

"Yes. Quite right."

Agdar seized Idunn by the shoulders.

"We have to do something."

"How about we do nothing?"

"We can't just do nothing!"

"Sure we can. Elsa's a wonderful baby. Sure, she ices the crib once in a while, but she's bubbly, quick, affectionate, and quiet. Since when was a baby as well-behaved as her?"

"The people might start a mob or revolt if they find out. We need to build her legitimacy."

"Or they might go on some happy fun time adventure."

"Or they might ignite a volcano and make the moon explode!"

"Now you're just being silly."

"Silly? Our daughter is magic!"

"Look, if you're so worried about our own baby, why don't we just make another baby and see if that one's better?"

"Huh?"

"I'll be the big boat and you be the little boat."

FADE TO BLACK. CENSORED DUE TO HORRIFIC BOAT RELATED DEPRIVITY.

OH MAN. SO BAD. SO AWFUL.

Eugene stepped down from the carriage gingerly, his bones creaking with every movement, his rice paper skin threatening to tear at the exertion. The glancing of the moonlight fell unto his white hair and he met the gaze of the moon with weary eyes.

A guard looked askew at the King.

"Sire? Do you need to be carried there?" asked the soldier.

"Nah, I'm fine. Don't worry about it," said Eugene.

Rapunzel stumbled out of the carriage, papers spilling out of her arms. She made a high-pitched whining noise as they fell to the ground, then shook it off. Ah well, she had already memorized the most important bits. Might as well destroy them now. She nodded to a guard and they set the mess ablaze. Meeting with Moltke in three weeks. The army was ready. The horses whinnied and one licked Rapunzel's face.

"Good horsie," said Rapunzel as she brushed its mane.

She fed the horse a cube of sugar. A soldier passed her a coat and she put it on. The entourage made its way down the stairs. Her footsteps were guided by the electric haze of Berlin. Her guards scanned the station for threats while the locals gaped in awe. The conductor smiled sheepishly at the Kaiserin before fumbling the door of the subway open. Rapunzel and Eugene boarded. Then they were off. The rattling clank of the train intensified as it sped along the underscape of Berlin, the Second City of the Empire. The inside of the sub was smoky and dark, the dank and stagnant air hanging heavy. It sped along the line, smoke and steam spewing forth as it barreled down the tunnel. Eugene groaned. It was certainly smoother than the carriage, but it had its own set of ills present.

The subway pulled up to its stop. They disembarked. Rapunzel looked up at the sky. The stars were being drowned out by the electric glow of the city. Ahead was the Royal Opera House. Floodlights streaked the darkness. It was a balmy midsummer's night. Security was tight. Although they were hidden, a careful enough eye could spy out the machine gun nests waiting in case of incident. The assembled company was far too important to take any risks.

They walked into the opera house. Practically everyone who was anyone had showed. In a corner, Anna chatted up some crazy "avant-garde" artists. Those paintings looked like blob monsters. Rapunzel chuckled a sensible chuckle. Anna did get along with those eccentric types well. Kristoff was standing to the side, trying to

understand what the hell all that newfangled art meant. A guard led Rapunzel and Eugene to their balcony seat.

The rest of the crowd streamed into their chairs.

Mr. Reynaud raised his hands. The crowd simmered down.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I had a dream. But it is only through the hard work of my team and the generous support of Kaiserin Rapunzel that it became a reality. What you are about to watch was only possible because of a spirit of international cooperation and openness. This is no mere zoetrope. This is the product of years of well-supported research. For now, it is one of a kind. But perhaps, one day, theaters will be able to present movie pictures around the globe. Without further ado, I present to you... Tangled."

Blocky white text appeared against a black background. This is the story of how I died.

Whispers went out amongst the crowd. Then, shock. Someone was speaking.

The spotlight went out to reveal Heinrich Vogl peeking his head out from a curtain. He gave a conspiratorial wink and a sly smile, putting his finger up to his lips in a shushing motion. Then he disappeared back behind the stage.

"Don't worry, this is actually a very fun story and the truth is, it isn't even mine. This is the story of a girl named Rapunzel," said Vogl.

Rapunzel couldn't help but sigh wistfully as the scene shifted and block letters saying "Pomerania, 1485" appeared. There was the sunflower right there. Well, a replica of it, anyways. The audience gasped as Gothel, portrayed by Celestine Galli-Marie, stole into the royal palace and kidnapped Rapunzel. One poor British duchess even fainted.

Then the orchestra struck up a tune. The sweet sound of a woman's voice came ringing through the air. At the same time, a woman appeared on the silvery screen (with an obviously fake wig). Some of the audience members gaped as they recognized the voice. Rapunzel certainly knew it. Adelina Patti's. It was hard to forget a price tag that steep. And her voice and acting was good too. But 150000 pounds payment. In gold bullion. Up front. Hopefully it would be worth it.

Then up came Gothel. Rapunzel gulped. She could almost feel her fake mother's arms wrapped around her. The voice of Gothel herself kept cutting into Galli-Marie's rendition of it, and Rapunzel found it difficult to properly evaluate the performance. At the end, she was unable to stop herself from mumbling an answer.

"I love you more," said Rapunzel.

"Huh? You say something, Blondie?" said Eugene, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"No. It's nothing," said Rapunzel.

The scene changed again. It was the heist. The Stabbingtons appeared. Vogl popped back out to snark at them.

"Ugly fellows, aren't they?" said Vogl.

In the fifth row, Baron Stabbington stood up.

"I resemble that comment!" he shouted with mock indignity.

Eugene chuckled as his film version was boosted over the cliff by the Stabbingtons.

"Still can't believe they fell for that. Suckers," said Eugene.

Eugene winced when his film likeness was panned right to the face.

When the Snuggly Duckling segment came up, the current Attila made his way to the stage. He showed a sign.

APPLAUSE IS MANDATORY.

THE SNUGGLY DUCKLING IS AN ORDINARY TAVERN.

THE SECRET POLICE IS ALWAYS WATCHING.

A few people laughed nervously. Attila returned to his seat.

With the guards and Stabbingtons in hot pursuit, the movie cut to an intermission. Everyone shuffled out to the lobby.

"Man, I'm worried. Do you think Rapunzel will make it out alright?" asked one Englishman. His companion just stared at him.

"Let's play a drinking game!" shouted Anna. "I've got twelve bottles of the Potocki's finest and too much sobriety!"

"A drinking game? What sort of drinking game?" asked a member of the Coronan general staff.

"Take a shot every time the Kaiserin uses her hair as a tool and take another if someone uses the name Flynn Rider menacingly!" replied Anna.

"We all know how this story goes. You're an idiot for suggesting that and anyone that accepts is one too. I'm in," replied another general.

"... so then we oil each other up and wrestle a bit. You know, just some normal man on man grappling," said the Turk.

"And you're telling me this doesn't sound gay to you at all? Not even a little?" replied the Austrian.

"No, it's an important part of our culture."

"A really gay part. Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay."

Prince Edward swaggered on up to a Russian countess and made advances towards her. She giggled and blushed. Eugene smirked. None of it was too overt, but he recognized the signs of it. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

The Emperor and Empress of France came up, the Empress clearly in a kerfuffle.

"Mother, you named me after a woman who kidnapped and imprisoned you for 18 years? Does that mean I'm the unfavorite?" sputtered Empress Gothel as she fanned herself nervously and darted her eyes about.

"No, of course not," replied Rapunzel.

"Yes, just a little," said Eugene.

The Empress of France burst out crying and Emperor Napoleon II took her outside. Rapunzel glared at Eugene.

"What? I had to. It was a perfect setup, Blondie," said Eugene.

A bell tolled, signaling everyone to get back inside. The movie was about to resume.

Immediately, Rapunzel used her hair to escape over a dam. The Coronan general staff collectively drank. Eugene looked at the screen pensively as his film counterpart escaped the flooded cavern.

"Magic hair. Still just as crazy now as it was then. You know, it really makes me wonder if I'm just been dreaming this whole time. It's still pretty unbelievable," said Eugene.

"If life's like a dream, that's just because dreams can come true," said Rapunzel as she snuggled up close to Eugene.

"That's one of the cheesiest things I've ever heard," said Eugene. "I like it."

They entered the city of Corona. It was amazing the kind of change that could be overlooked so long as it was gradual. Bit by bit, the city had grown up. Buildings had spread across the water to reach the opposite shore. The defensive walls had been torn down to make more room. Factories and shipyards had sprang up, exploiting the easy export and waste dumping afforded by the nearby Baltic sea. The city had grown like a weed. About the only parts that were still the same were the palace itself and the lanterns it threw out every year. Even the bridge had been modernized to increase traffic capacity. It was only when looking back at the past that it was obvious how different things were now. Different, but still good. She had found that most things were pretty good even if they did change. Then out came the lanterns. They were beautiful in person, to be sure, and stayed beautiful every year. But it was amazing how that beauty could be captured for eternity in such a form. Maybe one day everyone could see the lanterns. After the song finished, the crowd stood up to give the singers a standing ovation.

They were still giving the ovation when the Stabbingtons returned and the "betrayal" occurred. The crowd went deathly quiet. A small child began to cry. Eugene had a sudden spurt of energy and called out to the crowd.

"100 thalers says I make it out alright!" he said. "Any takers?"

"I'll take that bet. There's no way anyone could survive this," said Anna with a smug grin on her face. She downed another shot of vodka.

Film Rapunzel made the connection between the flag and all the suns. In retrospect, that was sort of obvious, wasn't it? Every birthday there were special lanterns. Lost princess. Yeah, sort of obvious. Of course, Gothel won that fight. Turns out gumption and ferocity was no match for being big and huge. That's why civilized folks invented guns.

Meanwhile, Eugene was in quite a pickle. Of course, Eugene survived. Maximus and the Snuggly cavalry arrived just in time.

"Me and Max sure got along, didn't we? I miss him. Remember when we made him Captain of the Guard?" said Eugene.

"Yeah. I also remembered the thousands of angry letters I got. 'Rapunzel is the next Caligula or Catherine the Great minus all the great parts'. 'HorsefuckerfuckfuckityfuckfuckyoufuckPrussianwhorefuckfuck'," said Rapunzel.

"It was just ahead of its time. One day, the world will learn to accept horse soldiers and horse police. Maybe we could throw some other animals in there too. We could get a bear artilleryman or something. Mark my words, it's the future," said Eugene.

Eugene and Maximus set out at top speed, heading back to the tower. Eugene climbed up only to be confronted with Gothel and a trapped Rapunzel. Many were biting their fingernails. Eugene was stabbed in the back.

"I knew it!" shouted Anna. "Looks like I'm gonna win."

When the deal was offered, the Minister of Finance cried out in anguish. Several had not known just how close they had been to losing their beloved Kaiserin. But then Eugene cut off Rapunzel's hair. As he died, the opera house was silent. Then he returned to life, Rapunzel reunited with her family, and the ending narration presented various propaganda points of the regime.

As the credits rolled, there was another standing ovation. Shouts of "Long live Kaiserin Rapunzel" and "Long live the House of Hohenzollern" rang out from the crowd. Reynaud was beaming. The millions sunk into experimental "motion picture" technology had paid off. Everyone seemed to be in agreement that the night's entertainment had been something mindblowing, nay, world-changing. It was the dawn of a new age. For once, the press might even work in her favor rather than against her. Anna started walking out.

"Didn't you lose a bet?" called Eugene.

"What? Oh. Whoa. Wow. Yeah. Uhhh... yeah. Yeah, about that. Did someone fart in here? Sure is... place. Places really are places, aren't they? Oh hey, that's Ulysses! Yo Ulysses, what up?" said Anna.

Ulysses S. Grant walked over.

"Everybody, this is President Grant. He's the President! Did you know the President does President things? He signs bills and stuff. He's a super cool dude," said Anna.

"It's nice to meet you," said Grant.

"Ulysses, I need you to do me a favor. See... I didn't bring any money. Could I borrow 100 thalers? I lost a bet," said Anna.

Grant clucked in disapproval as he counted out bills.

"Anna, you old rascal. Honestly, one of these days you're gonna get into a real jam. Why would you bet without money? Hell, what was the bet?" asked President Grant.

"I... uhhh... bet Eugene that Eugene would die in Tangled," said Anna.

"You bet Eugene that Eugene would die in Tangled," deadpanned the President.

"Well, how was I supposed to know he'd live? I hadn't seen the movie before," whined Anna.

"How do you put up with this little hellion?" asked Ulysses.

"She's family," said Rapunzel with a shrug.

"Do you still have enough money to take us all out drinking? I'm pretty sure Kristoff doesn't have money because I checked his wallet

this morning and bought a turtle. So cuuuuuuuuuuuute."

"I always have money for drinking," said Ulysses.

"How is the US doing?" asked Rapunzel. "Pretty good?"

"In my friends' hands right now, I'm sure they'll do fine," said Grant. "Current plan is to let the rebs down easy, let 'em sit in the corner and think about all the bad shit they've done."

The imperial couple walked outside.

"I think we should take the carriage the whole way back. The subway air doesn't quite agree with me," said Eugene.

"Sure, that's fine," said Rapunzel.

They boarded the carriage.

"So what'd you think of the movie?" asked Rapunzel.

"What'd I think? I love you, Blondie," said Eugene. "But more importantly? They finally got the nose right."

The King set his head on the Kaiserin's lap, smiled, and closed his eyes. When they arrived, guards carried him up to the royal bedroom of Charlottenburg, their summer palace. He slept soundly.

Some time during the night, he passed away. It had been a long life and a good one. This was the story of how a boy born in 1776 died. He died wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, despite him abandoning that ambition. In the end, he had found a new dream. And it had been a better one.

Such was the life and death of Eugene Fitzherbert, common thief turned king.

Ryszard Wielhorski groaned as he wiped the spittle from his mouth. Spit for effect, they said. It's dramatic, they said. What a lot of shit. He looked at the sad green lump of mucus congealing on the floor. Worthless.

"Hey Rys, you okay?" asked his friend Klaus.

"Of course I'm okay, why wouldn't I be okay?" replied Ryszard.

"You just... uhhh... hacked up that green blob," said Klaus.

It was for dramatic effect! Ah, forget it.

"It's nothing, I'm fine," said Ryszard.

"So you were saying something about pointlessness? Futility or whatsit?"

"Fuck it, I don't care."

"Yeah, but what's your argument?"

"I... ugh. It doesn't matter. I can see the village now," said Ryszard.

Another day, another zloty.

Ants marched in column towards their hill. Atop their backs was mounted a single leaf.

"You know what? It's like that. That's a convenient visual metaphor for what I'm talking about," said Ryszard.

"... the trees?" asked Klaus.

"No!"

"The village?"

"The fucking ants you idiot, the fucking idiots!"

"What about ants?"

"I could just lift that leaf up! Make their whole lives meaningless. Boom! Done! Isn't there something poetic about that? It's like rhyming or metalme or some bullshit," said Ryszard. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a lighter and cigarette. He began to smoke.

"They're just ants, man," replied Klaus.

"We're just fucking ants, motherfucker. We're just fucking motherfucking ants. Son of a whore. We're ants," said Ryszard. "You think that cumslum Pilsudski reads any of this crap? No, of course not. He's got more important things to do. Gotta bust commies, gotta bust kraut heads."

"Aren't we krauts?"

"Yeah, we're goddamn krauts. Half-damned and half-mad. We're mutts and mongrels. Slime of the earth types. That's us. You know Atlas? He was supposed to hold up the entire world and sky," said Ryszard.

Ryszard sucked hard on his cigarette. He threw it to the ground and stamped it out, then took a deep breath.

"Absolute fucking lunacy, that's what that is. Because sooner or later, everyone shrugs," said Ryszard.

They entered the village.

They knocked on the first door. A tall gaunt man answered.

"Who are you and what do you want?" asked the man.

"We're Pilsudski's jackbooted thugs. Fill out this survey telling us about your household," said Ryszard, handing him papers.

"We're very nice thugs. We mostly count things. I'm good at counting. My mum said so," said Klaus.

"Alright. Do you have a pen?" asked the man.

Klaus handed him a pen.

"Who's out there? Is it company? Why don't you tell your nana anything?" screeched an old woman's voice.

"Hello?" said Klaus.

"It's company, isn't it?" came the voice. "Why do you hide your nana from the world?"

"I'm not hiding you from the world!" said the man.

"It's the agents of the Kaiserin, isn't it? God bless Rapunzel, Saint of Saints and bringer of all that is holy and good!" shouted the woman.

"I'm sorry to say this, ma'am, but the Kaiserin has been dead for over 30 years!" shouted Klaus.

"What? God save us all! At least, as a good Catholic, she is assured a place by the Lord's side," said the woman.

"Actually, she was a protestant. Lutheran, actually. And head of the Coronan Lutheran Church! One of her self-given titles was Defender of the Protestant Faith," said Klaus.

"Good Lord! Please, God, I would trade my place in Heaven a thousand times over for the Kaiserin. We all would! Please God, do not judge her harshly!" said the woman. "Who sent you?"

"Pilsudski," said Ryszard.

Klaus fiddled with his suit.

"Long live Kaiser Pilsudski!" shouted the woman.

"Actually, it's President Pilsudski. We're a republic now," said Klaus.

"By God, you'll give me a heart attack! Is that what you want? You want to kill an old woman! Republics, the madness of it all. Republics are for women and cowards! Will the men of Corona stand up to defend a debased * **republic** * ? Absurd, truly absurd," said the woman.

"If it makes you feel better, he rules as an autocrat," said Klaus.

"They say the Poles have always been the prime exporter of freedom," said Ryszard.

"Well, that makes sense, doesn't it? If we export it all, it leaves none for us. Perfectly logical," pipped Klaus.

"What do I even have to live for anymore?" wailed the woman.

"Bjorgman-brand soy ice cream? Those little fruit Popsicle things? Ooooooh, movies! Hmmmm. Fresh bread. Happy puppies! And dolphin-safe dolphins," said Klaus.

"This was just a bad dream, old woman. Go back to bed," said Ryszard.

The gaunt man finished the survey, handed it back, and slammed the door.

"It wasn't a dream," said Klaus.

"Of course not," said Ryszard.

They walked slowly towards the next house. Klaus chuckled.

"Hey, I thought of something. What if you dropped the world on a bunch of ants?" asked Klaus.

"Well, I suppose half of them would be flattened."

"But the other half... ants are strong. They'd pick the globe back up. Isn't that right?" said Klaus.

Ryszard stopped and lit another cigarette.

"Hmmm. I guess you're right," said Ryszard.

The ants kept marching on.

Virtues hung on the door, engraved in bronze.

Austerity. Discipline. Honesty. Industriousness. Order. Piety.
Tolerance. Toughness.

Good mustache care. That last one had been engraved fifty years ago as a joke. The lord of the manor and the overseer had made a bet. The young lord lost. Still, this too was a value to live by.

It had been a breezy day when Oskar von Prappeln-Olesnicki returned from the war. The Great War, they had called it. He nodded to the overseer and handed over the keys to the mansion.

"The aristocracy is abolished," said von Prappeln. "Before they take my lands, you will have them. Tomorrow, I will join the men in the fields. That is all."

True to his world, von Prappeln appeared in the fields the next day, tools in hand, a Junker no longer. And as he toiled at his farming, he knew that an era was over. He was already dead. This he knew. He was just waiting for the last shot.

Little Boleslaw watched from his hiding place in the barn. Strange men were here. Should he go out? He really ought to be at school. It was his third year of instruction, and things were really getting quite difficult. He didn't want to be a bad child. But this was very strange. Father would know what to do. But where was Father?

His question would soon be answered. The strange men began to shout and broke into the house. They brandished guns. Father and

Grandpa were dragged out by the men. They were forced to kneel in front of the wall of the house.

The strange men laughed. The Russians had promised them some fun. They smirked as they backed up and readied their weapons. They were young. The soldiering life had been advertised as easy and patriotic. The war was over, after all. Soon enough, another one would come, but it would be simple. The forces of the West would not be able to put up any resistance after the collapse of capitalism. For now, they would amuse themselves as they saw fit.

Father began to cry. Father was a man named Hans. Hans von Prappeln-Olesnicki was a simple man. His education had been cut short, but he had persevered, returning home to work as a brickmaker. A soldier kicked him in the gut and he gasped for breath. His tormenter only laughed.

They told him to stand. He vomited. They told him to stand again. He wept softly. One of the soldiers scowled. He walked over and smacked Hans with the butt of his rifle. He seized him by the collar and pulled him up. Hans slumped against the wall, letting it hold his weight, but he did not fall over again. The soldiers counted. They shot.

Hans fell over. Light faded from his eyes.

Boleslaw suppressed a yelp in his throat. He had wet himself. Mom would be mad at him for that. She didn't like it when he wet the bed, and this was even worse.

Oskar, Boleslaw's grandfather, began to cackle like a hyena. The soldiers asked him what was so funny.

"You are cowards," said Oskar.

They immediately brought their guns to bear against him.

"Shoot then. Show me your mettle. Shoot! You are pathetic," said Oskar.

They fired. They missed. Oskar laughed.

"This is what the vaunted Coronan discipline has become? This? You shame your ancestors. You shame yourselves. This is pathetic. You whelpings are boys playing at soldiery," said Oskar.

One of them shook as he raised his rifle again. The others looked confused. They fired.

This time, Oskar was struck in the arm and chest. He continued to laugh, though his breath grew ragged and hoarse.

"You think... those were good shots? Hardly lethal. If the old Prussian general staff could see you, they would spit blood. Moltke spins in his grave. The hussars cry in anger. You are nothing, gentlemen. Weaklings and cowards. Spineless brats who think they're something just because they did some petty camp and polished their boots enough to receive guns. Shoot then! Perhaps three tries is enough for mongrels like you!" said Oskar.

The last shot came. After many decades, the last shot came. Oskar died. Oskar died as he knew he would. After all, the age of the Junker was over.

Boleslaw waited in the barn for an hour. He cried, but he didn't know why he was crying. After a hour, his mother came. She hugged him.

In a single day, they had gone from living in Konigsberg to Kaliningrad.

"Today, Boleslaw, you have become the man of the house. On the door are the virtues you should follow. I know you will make me proud," said Boleslaw's mother.

"I'll make you proud, mommy," said Boleslaw.

True to his world, von Prappeln appeared in the fields the next day, tools in hand, a boy no longer.

Peace

"We're chasing the future, Elsa."

Anna stood in the light, beckoning to her sister.

"You can't catch the future," said Elsa.

"We can try," said Anna.

They held each other tight.

The seeds of the First World War were sown in the 1870s. It was a decade of intense political turmoil and restructuring. The Americans were busying themselves with Reconstruction. The Japanese were undergoing a titanic nation-building effort. A new Sultan rose to the Ottoman throne. The long reign of Kaiserin Rapunzel came to an end. The decade would see the rise of some of the greatest captains of industry in history. Preston Whitmore, a young graduate of Georgetown, would found Whitmore Industries. Rockefeller would create Standard Oil in 1870. Andrew Mellon ran a business for the first time in 1872. Carnegie was moving all of his energies to steel to exploit postwar opportunities. Bjorgman Water began to expand out of its traditional municipal piping/bottled water niche. It was a time of great change.

It was this change that permitted the collapse of the old order. Until the Year of Revolution, peace had been maintained by the Concert of Europe. After that, it was maintained by a carefully constructed balance of power. Although Great Britain was the premier power of the era, it was not a superpower. It could not act unilaterally. It had to act through diplomacy, treachery, and most of all, money. One French diplomat would remark that there were "Never any backstabbers as congenial and likable as the British." British ships kept trade flowing and the seas clear. The balance of power was well

calculated. Although Corona could overcome Britain on land if it rallied its allies, this would prompt a response from the Austrians and Ottomans. Similarly, the Austrians and Ottomans would never strike first, as Corona held more power. Although Corona could attempt a naval arms race with Britain, Britain would always win such a race. It would not change their relative power and cause both powers to incur great expenses for no gain. Corona's map of Africa lay in Europe. Peace was maintained voluntarily.

But the ascent of Eugene I changed things. To understand this, we must understand the process of Polonization that occurred over the course of the

19th century. In the past, it was assumed that Rapunzel simply accepted Polish culture as a matter of course, having not been brought up in a Coronan aristocracy that still considered itself nominally German. Recent research into the history of the bedroom and sexuality, however, casts doubt on the original hypothesis. New interpretations suggest that it was the influence of Eugene Fitzherbert that affected many of the early policy reversals that allowed for the ultimate Polonization and hybridization of Coronan culture.

"Though she is accustomed to live in one of the good Chancellor's guest rooms during such times, her resistance never lasts long. Within a week, she is invariably broken. Visitors are advised to ignore the sight of the Kaiserin begging her consort for a night of passionate lovemaking if possible. To do otherwise would be rude." - Excerpt from a French diplomatic pocket reference

Eugene consistently forced a reduction on repression. This had the effect of allowing the common folk of Corona, predominately Polish compared to the majority German upper class, to express their native culture. As time went on, more and more szlachta suffered from diminished finances. At the same time, many lower Junkers found the extensive networks of contacts possessed by such szlachta families very useful. As intermarriages occurred, the Polish sides of such pairings often found ways to pass along their

language. Unfortunately, there was little public support for such teaching, and few governesses officially taught Polish. Many of these youths learned a bastardized version of Polish, warped by their lack of proper education. When the aristocracy eventually decided to institutionalize their Polish/German hybrid language, the Polish side had already been heavily distorted. This was made even worse by Elsa's passing sarcastic suggestion that they add special cases for derivation and integration to the already extremely complicated Polish numeral system. Much to her horror, they did it. By the time Pilsudski took the country, the language was a mess. His efforts to fix it went unrewarded, causing bitterness later in his life. When the Soviets took over, they finally managed to impose sort of order on the fractured grammar. Through certain tricks, they were able to create a sort of logic to the maze of bizarre cases and declensions. The Soviet committee assigned to normalizing the language eventually settled with various compromises.

Eugene I did not like this Polonization. He did not like many things. Contrary to popular opinion, he did understand administration. But he hated the policies of his mother, which he (rightly or wrongly) all attributed to Bismarck. He attempted to fight Polonization by aligning himself further with the Germans. He also decided to break with the voluntary understanding Corona held with the British. A naval arms race began. This naturally raised tensions in the Atlantic. Of course, he soon lost the support of France and Italy. Russia, more out of apathy rather than loyalty, followed him. His response was to seek out the friendship of the Austro-Germans. This led him into an alliance with the Ottoman Empire, creating the Pact of the Four Emperors.

At this point, we must move to the Ottomans. Shortly after Eugene I took the throne, the future Blood Sultan would also inherit the Ottoman Empire. Almost immediately, there was unrest. Neither the political elite nor the various oppressed minorities of the empire trusted him. Very quickly, he was engulfed by paranoia. The mechanisms of state repression went into overdrive as he wantonly assassinated anyone he disliked and slaughtered entire populations.

Needless to say, many people across Europe were upset. The Sultan soon found himself nearly friendless. Only the Austrian kaiser stood with him, and even then, not for any personal reasons. Franz Joseph I was a man of honor and principles. He greatly disliked the Sultan as a man. But years of treaty and alliance obliged Austria to maintain the Ottoman state. Austria stood by the Ottoman Empire because it believed in principles and duty. Franz Joseph I vowed to show that at least one country still believed in nobility and honesty. It would be a mistake that would ultimately bring his empire to ruins.

Eugene I soon found himself embroiled in this political turmoil. If fewer changes had occurred, perhaps he would have been peacefully forced into the European order shaped by his mother and her chancellor. As it stood, he was able to use the chaos to his own advantage and exert his own misguided will. The Sultan was a young man and Eugene an old one. But Eugene, even after his coronation, was still treated as a boy by the powerful players of the Ottoman Empire. His dismissal of his mother's old confidantes and faithful servants did not change that view. It would only instill unrest in the bureaucracy and sycophancy among those that, ideally, would speak truth to power. Jules Ferry delivered a speech lambasting Eugene I only a day after one of his mass dismissals. This only further fueled his hatred of France. The paranoid Sultan and the disgruntled Kaiser soon became fast friends. The character of his allies soon became apparent to Franz Joseph, but he forced himself to soldier on for the sake of his country's dignity. But when his wife was assassinated and his only son committed suicide, he retreated inwards on himself, eventually dying a broken man in 1902.

Eugene I ruled far differently than his mother. Rapunzel the Divine had always taken a maternal attitude towards her subjects. She relied heavily on the Secret Police and a well-subjugated media, manipulating the common folk and eliminating all dissenters. As such, she was immensely popular. After all, no one would ever know of any reason not to love her. Everything was filtered through a narrative she developed herself. Corona leaped from strength to strength, but only with her careful guidance! Without her, the nation

was sure to falter. It was a scary world out there. Her Secret Police were as much community organizers as they were assassins. Many a child lived for the Annual UNHAPPINESS IS TREASON SO SMILE EVERY DAY Bake Sale. The organization was half-jokingly and half-sincerely referred to as the Ministry of Love, or Miniluv for short.

By contrast, Eugene I ruled through brute force. It was a common misconception that he trampled on personal liberties. In truth, he respected the law and rights far more than his mother had. International pressure also forced to liberalize his relationship with the free press. Rapunzel had believed in a ounce of prevention rather than a pound of cure. When it was clear that someone would eventually become a threat, they were eliminated, no questions asked. This saved on later suppression of revolts and public executions. Use of the death penalty skyrocketed under Eugene I. This did not help his reputation as a oriental despot.

Things boiled over as a result of three incidents. First, in the north, the Swedes began to ethnically cleanse their Sami minority. The Arendelle royal family was outraged and petitioned Eugene I for assistance. After only a week, some accidental shootings occurred which escalated into fighting. A declaration of war from Sweden soon followed. Meanwhile, the Balkans were under duress. Across the entire Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks were building networks of contacts and support. The forces of the Sultan were dangerously overstretched. A revolutionary, Delchev, launched his war of liberation. Sensing blood, the Young Turks followed suit. Overseas papers were overjoyed, as was the public of Europe, eager to see a blow struck against the well-known tyranny of the Red Sultan. In Westminster, diplomats secretly cheered, praying for the Sultan's downfall. The backwardness of the Ottoman Empire was a black mark on the European order. A young and handsome captain in the revolutionary forces, Ataturk, soon became a darling of foreign press. Finally, the French smelled opportunity. Corona's main allies were all tied up. Russia was dealing with severe domestic unrest. The Ottoman Empire was in open revolt. Even Austria-Germany, originally counted on to be strong, was weakening. The death of

Franz Joseph had come at a politically inconvenient time. His successor, Franz Ferdinand I, was able in many respects. His modernizing notions would have been welcome at any other time. His intellect was clear to any he spoke to. Unfortunately, from the very moment he took the throne, he was at odds with the Hungarians. He despised them, and unfortunately for him, he made this very clear. They were a dangerous enemy to make, as they were one of three primacy ethnic groups in Austro-Germany and held a significant portion of the Reichstag. One of the weaknesses of democracy is deadlock, and the Hungarian soon froze the operations of government, despite tensions rising across Europe. In the end, the Hungarians would be Ferdinand's undoing. He was killed when a battle broke out near the palace between guards and radical Hungarian separatists. Only days later, the peace treaty ending the First World War would be finalized, killing Austro-Germany as well. The French sensed all of this, and prepared to strike. Border crises and provocations were manufactured all along the Rhine. The German general staff convened and agreed that they had to follow the Schlieffen plan. A quick victory would be their best chance. The Germans invaded Belgium.

The Great War began.

This is the story of how I died.

But don't worry, this is actually a fun story... ish. And the truth is it isn't even mine. This is the story of a guy named Fritz.

It's really not important how I met my best friend Fritz. If it hypothetically involved nudity and a snow owl, well, that would just be embarrassing. I don't have to mention how I came to be either. But I will anyways. Once, there was a poor young Lithuanian man with no job and no hope. When he heard some Poles were rebelling and trying to restore the Commonwealth, he hopped at the chance. He showed up just in time for the crackdown from Her Imperial Majesty's Kingdom Guards. Naturally, he panicked. One of the local peasant girls waved at him and offered him refuge. He just had to

escape down a dark tunnel with her. The dark tunnel led to a small hole. He couldn't see anything, but her voice said to crawl down the hole. As it turned out, that hole didn't lead to safety after all. It led to her vagina. At this point, the tunnel lit up. An old man was there with a rifle, watching him shove his head through a cardboard hole into a vagina. That's how my grandparents met.

Needless to say, meeting Fritz taught me a lot about Corona's diversity.

Anyways, the camp looked like hell. Apparently the Captain and the Sarge were there to greet us newbies personally.

The Lieutenant stared us all down.

"Don't mess this up," he said. "I want everyone on their best behavior. First impressions matter!"

The Captain waved at us cheerfully.

"Welcome new friends! We're going to have a lot of fun here!" piped the Captain.

The Sarge gave us two thumbs up. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a man's foot fall off. The Captain must have noticed because he immediately responded.

"Oh, don't worry. Trench foot is part of the fun time experience. That's why they call this the Great War! Because it's so great," said the Captain.

The Sarge shot him a look that said "I don't think they're buying it". The Captain shrugged.

"Gentlemen, you fine folks are here for one reason. It's not because you're the most patriotic, most courageous, or most noble, because those folks are dead. It's not because you're the smartest. They're dead too. It's not because you're good at surviving. Me and him,

we're good at surviving. In fact, I'm sure most of you have no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Especially goober over there," said the Captain, pointing at the Lieutenant. "No, you're here because Mother Corona has lowered her standards."

I'm pretty sure the Lieutenant wasn't listening because he was practically glowing.

"Anyways, you're now part of a long and storied tradition. This company is part of the 26th Infantry Regiment, the Flying Pans. The Flying Pans first organized as a civilian militia to defend the city of Corona from Turks. Then, we nobly removed kebab in all three Russo-Turkish wars. West Slavs and East Slavs joined together in glorious union to kill Turks. Even in the joint Franco-Coronan invasion of China, we still found some Turkish expats and removed them. We have a glorious tradition, don't we?" said the Captain.

The Sarge mimed cheering and hurrahing.

"Today we are allied with the kebab," said the Captain. He paused for a beat. "I think we all know where this is going."

The Sarge made a slitting throat motion and then did some mock weeping.

The Captain pointed over No Man's land.

"Over on the other side of that bloody mud is the enemy. He is dug in and very well armed. We are depleted of supplies. In a few months, a few million doughboys will be coming from America. They're doughboys because they're fat, stupid, pasty, and uneducated. Don't worry, they can still shoot a gun, and that's all they need. Your job is to run through that mud while getting shot at. If you survive that, you will attempt to knife people in the face. If you survive that, then we will give you a cheap piece of shiny metal. Good job. You may ask why I want you to do this," said the Captain.

The Sarge scratched his head and shrugged.

"Well, the short answer is Serbs. The longer but still short answer is Serbs and Germans. The long answer is that I also have a boss and I hate him. His name's Colonel Charming because his old nick was Prince Charming. He likes to blather on and on about duty, and honor, and happy endings, and love, and... well, you should've seen my face when he got taken down a peg. Even better, you should've seen his. Married to some whore named Flamerella or something. Anyways, he doesn't have a face now. Burned off. That was a joke. Laugh," said the Captain.

A few of us chuckled uneasily.

"But his face really is burned off. I just find it hilarious. Anyways, him and a bunch of fluffy ponces like him told us to go fight the Frogs over some bullshit we don't care about. Welcome to the Great War! Great War, as you may have figured out, is an ironic name. It's not great at all. Actually, it's pretty awful," continued the Captain.

"Does the good sergeant ever talk?" asked the Lieutenant.

"Oh, sure he does. He has a lovely voice. He's very patriotic too. Show them," said the Captain.

The Sarge nodded. On cue, he began to sing. Almost immediately, I recognized the tune. It was Zelenski's great patriotic anthem, *Something That I Want*. He had a startlingly feminine voice. Despite the obvious sarcasm of the performance, it still moved the patriotism in my heart. Or perhaps it was the confused patriotism in my pants.

"She's the girl with the best intentions.

He's the man of his own inventions

She looked out the window; he walked out the door,

And she followed him and he said 'what are you looking for?' sang the Sergeant as he began to dance.

He was rather spry for a scarred, bearded 6'2" man. Moments later, the Captain joined in the dance, though he kept his eye on us.

"Anyways, we're fucked. But at least we tried to spread Coronan values around the world or something. Can anyone tell me what those are? No one? Really, no one? Sergeant, enlighten them."

"Hair fetishes, foot fetishes, bondage, and female domination, sir!" barked the Sergeant.

"Correct!" said the Captain.

They both pulled out bottles of vodka.

"This is Victory vodka. They call it Victory vodka because it's a great victory if you can get it down. While we explore its mysteries, Lord Goober is in charge. Good luck! I'm sure you're in good hands," said the Captain.

They both saluted us and walked away.

The Lieutenant smiled maliciously.

Nicholas Hohenzollern-Romanov, private citizen, checked the mail. Spam. Again.

"Dear King Tsar Nickolas II of Russha:

I am a powerful Nigerian warlord from Africa. I have recently hear of your plight and am willing to pledge a Country in WEST AFRICA all soldiers. My friend is Minister of TRANSport and FINANCINGS in France, very powerful contry!. My generlas and most powerful strongmen were arrested by the government of my Country and put in detention since 28/09/1891. I am store many thousands of diamonds and government relics in secret fortifications in the capital. You can verify this from any gem dealer in Europe.

I escaped to a hide out in BRITISH AFRICA, another REGION IN AFRICANS.

Boxes xcontainins of thousads of LOYALTY OATHS which are OATHS guarentee of LOYAL.I told them that the boxes contain documents.

I cannot move about freely now. I need Your help urgently for both FUNDRAISING and acquries of CASUS BELLI.

Talking to foreign lady? Though I did not tell her why I needed the contact of any foreigner king. If you are sendings \$5,000,000 in American money daollars, I can rearm my army then march to you and invade Russia! We are can restorre Russian monarchy.

Because of the urgent and confidential nature of this business, you are advised to keep everything secret for now. if you are interested in doing this business with me, kingly reply to mail immediately.

Thanks for your anticipated co-operation."

Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice! The missus had let that scoundrel Rasputin into their home, and what had happened? He stole Catherine the Great's Easter Egg and Elsa the Magnificent's Polandball #12 and vanished into the night. Bastard. He was too smart for such tricks now.

Nicholas went back inside. Maybe he'd play tennis today. That would be fun. Honestly, the whole affair had really been for the best. To be quite honest, he hadn't the foggiest idea of how to run a country, let alone one as large as the Russian Empire. The succession would have been a train wreck. Besides, he had lived in Arendelle his whole life. Nicholas caught himself. Of course it wasn't Arendelle anymore. It was Norway. And he was Nicholas, plain Nick, not King Nicholas I of Arendelle. He frowned. Ten years had not made it any easier. Guess that was bound to happen. Habits were hard to break.

He would have indeed missed the scenic fjords and mountains of Arendelle. The taiga of Siberia just wasn't the same. He sat down in his chair and melted. The leather was smooth and he bathed in the warmth of the fireplace. Perhaps he'd get a blanket too. Actually, he knew what would be perfect. Some hot chocolate would really hit the spot. He got up from his seat and went to the kitchen. A few minutes later, he returned and fell back into his chair, sipping from a mug of hot chocolate. Perfect. Absolutely perfect. Another perfect day in the most perfect country on Earth. Britain was too gloomy. France was nice but full of the French. The Coronans were too uptight. The south of Europe was far too hot. The Americas? Good joke. Norway was truly a paradise on Earth.

The door rang.

Nicholas groaned. It was probably more solicitors. Or tourists. Tourists were the worst. Come on, let's gawk at the deposed king and would-be tsar! Is that stubble? Who would think such a man could have stubble? Well, obviously he'd have stubble. He had thought one of the great pleasures of a private citizen would be the ability to walk around without pants. Evidently it was not. Company demanded constant pantsness. Sometimes they even wanted to see his son. The gall of them! If any of them ever touched the boy... well... well. There would be consequences. No one hurt his son. Never.

He dragged himself upwards and went to the door. Who would it be now?

"Bulak! My friend! How are you?" said Nicholas.

"I told you he'd be here," muttered Bulak-Balachowicz.

"Well, I'll be damned. You were right after all," came a voice.

A man walked into sight and offered his hand. Nicholas shook it.

"King Nicholas. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Otto von Below," said the man.

"Hello Mr. Below. How's the weather down there?" asked Nicholas.

"Excuse me?" said von Below.

"It's... a... eh. Never mind. So what brings you here?" asked Nicholas.

Just then, Alexandra appeared at the other side of the bridge. She waved. Nicholas waved back and blew a kiss. Alexandra power walked on over. Nicholas went to her and they embraced.

"How is my little feistypants doing? You haven't been bad, have you?" teased Alexandra.

"Me? Never. This is Balachowicz, you know him, and his friend Mr. Down Under," said Nicholas.

"Nicholas, I'm not sure you're awa-" started von Below.

"How is Alexei? I do worry about him, you know that right? He has been fine today, hasn't he?" asked Alexandra.

"Of course. He's sleeping right now. He tires easily, but he is much better, I think. The doctors care for well. Much better than any witchcraft," said Nicholas, the last words holding a bit of an edge.

"Nicholas, I really mu-" said Bulak.

"I have the marigolds the governess wanted," said Alexandra. "They were quite the bother to find. I had scoured Bjorgman Square for hours. A local Sami man and his cart had the only ones, and I got the last ones."

"WHITE RUSSIA," said Bulak.

Nicholas stopped and held his breath for a moment.

"What on earth are you talking about, Bulak?" asked Nicholas.

"You heard me. White Russia. Tonight, the White Russians ride again," said Stanislaw Balachowicz.

"This is monarchist nonsense," said Nicholas.

"Nicky, what is going on?" asked Alexandra.

"Nothing, Alicky. Bulak is just being a fool who can't let it go. The Russian Empire is dead and good riddance," said Nicholas.

"Good riddance? That's your birthright you're talking about. What about the throne? What about Divine Right?" said Alexandra.

"All bloody nonsense that I can't believe I bought. The Russian throne is a corpse throne for a corpse's imperium. And the Arendelle throne is worth less than forty acres and a mule. In the Belgian Congo. And the forty acres are on fire. And infested with Jews. God has delivered us here for a reason. He has a plan, and I plan to abide by it. It's happier here," said Nicholas.

"Listen to me, Nicholas," said Bulak.

"So he really doesn't read the news, eh?" said von Below.

"No, he doesn't," said Bulak.

"Why would I read the news? All bothersome tripe of empty men fighting over empty thrones and bloody patches of dirt," said Nicholas. "Good riddance to all of it!"

There was a sudden drop in temperature. An icy wind blew by. Snowflakes began to flutter downwards.

"A storm is brewing," said Bulak.

"I know. I know," said von Below. "Let it rage on. The Swedes have forgotten the suffering of winter."

"The Swedes? What do Swedes have to do with anything?" asked Alexandra.

"Bulak... is being a crank of a man. He is upsetting you," said Nicholas. "He is upsetting you and being an unkind guest."

"Do you have family elsewhere?" asked von Below.

"There's cousin Eugene Frederick in Belgium and his manor... cousin George in England, though I don't think he'd appreciate unwanted company," said Alexandra.

"Unwanted company? Sunshine, darling, we're not going anywhere," said Nicholas.

Nicholas grinned a placid smile. But Alexandra glared at the smile. Whatever was coming was bad news.

"You're not in charge here. I am. There's other Romanovs in California... Hesse, of course, though I don't think the Republicans would appreciate it. Hmmm," pondered Alexandra.

"What's all this business now? We're not deciding anything! Why would we leave? It's comfy here! You hear that? Comfy! So. Comfy. Amazingly comfy. Best comfy. Arendelle best comfy. Arendelle palace best comfy. Home of my ancestors best comfy. Elsa and Anna **best comfy** . Do you hear that? I hear that. It sounds like a crackling fire and fresh hot chocolate," said Nicholas, regal and stately.

"You can't stay here," said Bulak. "The Swedes are coming, and the red dogs will not be far behind."

"They've already crossed the border. Our defenses have been set up around the North Mountain. We have artillery readied and trenches dug. They'll not take Arendelle without a fight," said von Below.

"The army is ready. The Swedes send mere boys at us, boys entranced by the false whore words of Communism. Our men are hardened veterans. They have Prussian discipline and noble Sarmatian blood in their veins. They will pay for each inch of Arendelle soil they dare take. But you have to leave," said Bulak. "You can come back if we win."

"When you win," said Nicholas.

"If," said Bulak.

Nicholas stared blankly outwards.

"We can't leave. How are we supposed to leave? Alexei is far too weak. No, he's far too ill," said Nicholas. "We can't move him. We mustn't move him. We mustn't leave."

Olga Nikolaevna wandered in.

"Mama? Papa? What's going on?" asked Olga.

"Go back inside," said Alexandra.

"But-" objected Olga.

"Go back inside. Now. This is adult business," said Alexandra.

"You have to go," said von Below.

"Please. What is the point of all this?" asked Nicholas.

"You have to leave," said Bulak.

"We're going to start packing, Nicholas," said Alexandra.

"Yes," said Nicholas, dazed. "We're going to start packing."

"We will leave to Belgium. We will depart as soon as we can," said Alexandra.

"We will leave to Belgium. We will be going soon," said Nicholas. He shot a pleading gaze at Bulak.

Bulak stared back for a moment. Then he started speaking.

"I was born in Russia. Yes, I was. Born in Belarus. But... what am I talking about? I'm rambling. I was raised here. I was stationed here during much of my peacetime career. When I was in the muds of France, I thought always of here. So... what am I saying? I am saying, my King, that Arendelle will not die. The allies tried to break us! Britain tried to destroy Arendelle. They may have abolished the monarchy, but we cannot forget. We will not forget. The British cast down the images of Elsa. They tried to destroy our spirit. But it cannot be done. They may win the coming day. They may crow about a red dawn rising. But their light cannot never outshine the light we hold in our own hearts. They can abolish the monarchy on paper, but a treaty is just paper. No, the monarchy lives on in our hearts. They can destroy everything on paper, but they cannot tame the hearts of men. So Arendelle will live on and Arendelle is eternal," said Bulak-Balachowicz.

Bulak and Nicholas looked each other in the eyes.

"Go with God, Nicholas," said Bulak.

"Go with God," replied Nicholas.

The hour of judgment drew near.

The hour of judgment had arrived.

Colonel Skramstad looked through his binoculars. The enemy was upon them.

He kicked his horse into motion. It was time.

"Men of Arendelle! Reject the false name of your oppressors. Today, we are not of Norway, we are of Arendelle. This may be the last time strong men may say such words. But if it is, it will not be for lack of effort. They will tell us that the horse soldier's day is done. They will tell us that the machine's cold hands now rule the field. Perhaps they do. The men advancing towards us certainly believe it. They are iron men, steel men! Cold men! Soulless men! This is the fruits of their communism, to take their spirit from them. They say that we're primitive! They say that our time has passed! Perhaps it has, but we will end the era with glory! They will not say the last horsemen died like cowards! We are hussars! We are the sword of Arendelle! We are the 3rd Gdynian! Our battalion was the personal battalion of Princess Anna! One last time, the men of Arendelle shall charge. One last time, Arendelle shall roar! Charge!" shouted the Colonel.

The horses went over the ridge. The thundering of the artillery rolled on. One last time, the forces of the 19th century did battle with the forces of the 20th. The forces of Communism met the forces of Monarchy. Red splattered against the white snow of the mountain. The machine guns cackled their wicked death rattle, but the horses did not cease their charge. Even as bullets sped through the air, tearing ragged holes in them, the momentum of the dying carried them forward. Sabers met skulls as the sky came down in great blasts of steel and fire. The North Mountain shook as the world came down all around it. The age of Princesses and Fairy Tale kingdoms came to an end.

The last true horsemen charged. The last true horsemen died. They passed into immortality.

Nicholas watched Bergen burning in the distance. He held Alexei tight.

It was snowing, but the snow burned away as it neared the flame. The red gleaming stretched into the sky, reflected as rubies and molten copper on the broken blue steel of the ocean. The smoke made distant recollection of ancient pollution hanging over the old

Arendelle factories. Nicholas could not cry out. His voice was already too hoarse.

The snow was falling. It was falling still. A single snowflake landed on his cheek. It was a kiss from long dead Queen Elsa. Be at ease, it said. Everything will be alright. I love you. The world will keep spinning on. It was a kiss of solace. But Nicholas did not believe. When misery came, it came as deluge. There would be more.

"Don't cry," said Nicholas to Alexei.

The flames of Arendelle faded until they became a single distant ember. Then that ember was extinguished by the grasp of cruel and vengeful Triton, slipping out of sight.

And Alexei didn't cry.

But Nicholas could not stop himself. The tears fell, salty and bitter.

Anna took a deep breath. Then she took another. She could do this. It would be easy. Keep breathing.

"Anna, are you alright? You look red and you're hyperventilating," said Kristoff.

"Kristoff, aren't you worried? I mean, not that there's anything to be worried about but I'm worrying and don't you think it would be appropriate to be worrying about things right now because it's pretty worrisome!" said Anna in a very calm, even, level-headed manner.

"Whoa, whoa, slow down there. What's there to worry about?" asked Kristoff.

"The ball!" shouted Anna.

"Oh. Oh, that. I was just going to ditch and hang out with some cowboys. We're going to tip cattle. It'll be fun," said Kristoff. "I

thought you would too."

"Ditch? I can't just ditch! They're expecting me there! They'll throw confetti at me and then my nose will get like super itchy and stuff and I'll have to not sneeze and then some pompous Turbodouche McAssholerton will announcify me and I'll be like... 'Hi'. Yeah, that's it. And then everyone will crowd around the general because that's me and I'll be like... 'Hi'. I can do this. I can totally do this. It's easier than killing someone, right?" said Anna.

Her hands were shaking. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it. She sucked in the smoke and looked at herself in the mirror. Was it cold in here? Yeah, it was pretty cold. One could almost call it... Chile! Ha! Anna burst into a mad cackle then placed a hand over her mouth.

Okay, that was awful. She had to pull herself together.

"Eh. In my experience, people die pretty easily. I once saw one rookie fall through the ice and disappear without a trace. Another time, some guy got caught by wolves. The gore was unpleasant. Out in the woods, it's really easy to see how squishy people are," said Kristoff.

"That's not helping! Why aren't you helping?" shouted Anna. "Hold me. Feed me chocolate. Oh god. Oh god, they're going to ask so many stupid questions and I'll have to make up a bunch of stupid answers. Where does gunpowder come from, general? Well, when a mommy gun and a daddy gun and an Armenian love each other very much..." said Anna. "Wait, what am I even talking about?"

"So why can't you ditch again?" asked Kristoff.

"Because duties and stuff! And plus, Rapunzel will yell at me and then she'll do that creepy stare and I'll have to clean toilets. Have you ever had to clean toilets?" said Anna.

"I tinkle in the woods," replied Kristoff.

impressions count! And Dad said that the ideal ruler should be both feared and loved. Which didn't really make sense because Anna never loved her rulers even though she feared them. Geometry was hard. It was so, so hard. Logistics was much nicer. She waded into the crowd, a fish out of water. That expression never did make sense, did it? Fish couldn't leave the water on their own. Wouldn't it make more sense to say... a bird... on the ground... without wings... or something? Yeah. A landbird on the ground that used to be an air bird.

Time for mixing. Conversation stuff. Small talk. Anna walked up to a group of people. The key was to get the last word and to always stay in control. Rapunzel taught her that diplomacy was a game of bluffing, appearances, subtly, manipulation, and above all, ruthlessness. Stay calm, stay collected, speak softly, but speak decisively. Their verbal attacks would be relentless and she would have to counter.

"It's so daring that a woman like you made the bold move of dressing like that," said one diplomat's wife. "I would never choose that if I were you."

Like that. That was a little dig. Implied stupidity and incompetence at dressing gooder. She would show her.

"Well, you're just a dumb fat cow. And you're ugly. So there," said Anna.

The woman was silenced. Perfect, just like that. She had stayed in control and set the terms of the situation. What a clever comeback. Now she was getting in the groove of things.

Anna swaggered on over to a table while the group behind her gaped in awe at her brilliance and wit.

"Ah, how lovely of you to join us," said a Chilean minister. He tipped his hat to her.

She polished her medals and grinned before sitting down. Across the table was a strange man. She soon recognized him.

"Hey you! You're from the southern US, aren't you?" asked Anna.

"What? I don't know what you're talking about," replied the southerner.

"Nah, you're definitely from there. I can see it. How have you been? Hey, wanna sing a song?" asked Anna.

"No, I..." objected the man, but Anna had already stood.

He perked up a bit as he recognized the tune. Then he began to squirm uncomfortably as he heard the lyrics.

"Away down South in the land of traitors,

Rattlesnakes and alligators,

Right away, come away, right away, come away.

Where cotton's king and men are chattels, Union boys will win the battles,

Right away, come away, right away, come away.

Come on, sing along with me!

We'll all go down to Dixie,

Away, away,

Each Dixie boy must understand

That he must mind his Uncle Sam,

Away, away,

We'll all go down to Dixie.

Away, away,

We'll all go down to Dixie.

I wish I was in Baltimore,

I'd make Secession traitors roar,

Right away, come away, right away, come away.

We'll put the traitors all to rout.

I'll bet my boots we'll whip them out,

Right away, come away, right away, come away.

We'll all go down to Dixie.

Away, away,

Each Dixie boy must understand

That he must mind his Uncle Sam,

Away, away,

We'll all go down to Dixie.

Away, away,

We'll all go down to Dixie.

Oh, may our Stars and Stripes still wave

Forever o'er the free and brave,

Right away, come away, right away, come away.

And let our motto ever be - "For Union and for Liberty!"

Right away, come away, right away, come away.

We'll all go down to Dixie.

Away, away,

Each Dixie boy must understand

That he must mind his Uncle Sam,

Away, away,

We'll all go down to Dixie.

Away, away,

We'll all go down to Dixie!" sang Anna. Nobody joined in. She sat back down.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted, in the minister's possession, a tiny portrait. It was a woman, raven-haired and dark-eyed, skin like the desert sands. She whistled.

"Dang, that's one hot momma. You tapping that?" asked Anna.

"... that would be my mother," said the minister.

Ahhhh. Whoops.

"Your mother is a very beautiful woman," said Anna. "I really didn't mean any offense. In fact, I only bring it up because... she reminds me of this one prostitute."

Nice save.

"Excuse me?" asked the minister.

Maybe not a nice save.

"You know... prostitute. Whore. Lady of the night. Cum dumpster. Slutbag. Village bicycle with a coin slot attached. Sucky-sucky five thaler. One of those. You got the idea right?" said Anna. "And she was a really pretty whore! And nice too! 10/10 great tits would do again."

"Are you saying my mother is a prostitute?" asked the minister.

"No, no, no! You don't understand, I'm just saying she looks like a prostitute!" said Anna. "And now that I think about it, she wouldn't really look like that anymore, right? Because she had you. So she'd be old and wrinkly. Not that's bad or anything! I mean, I don't know, but I would probably still do her. Probably."

The minister looked upset. Her latest comments had probably offended him. She had to put things right.

"In fact, I think women, like wine, get better with age!" shouted Anna.

Perfect.

"The wrinkles enhance the flavor, much like years in the barrel really brings out the aroma and taste of a good wine. Indeed, a good old woman, like a good old wine, should complement any meal!" said Anna with conviction.

But she still had to sell it some more. She had to convince them.

"No, I'll go even farther. A good old woman can be the meal! That's right! I suggest that we all eat out old woman! I'm not an ageist! I don't discriminate based on age! I think we should all be proud to eat out grannies, nannies, and all sorts of old ladies. That's a promise and a fact. So next time you vote, vote for me as President. In conclusion, sic semper Tyrannosaurus," said Anna.

An awkward silence settled over the room as everyone drank in the words of the good general. Her great wisdom had left them in awe. Anna waited. The awkward silence persisted. Anna waited some more. A woman started weeping in the corner, but for the most part, it was still silent. God, this was weird. Time to check the manual. Anna reached into her pocket and pulled out a little black book.

It was labeled "Kaiserin Rapunzel's Guide to Diplomacy for Perfectly Lovely and Nice Cousins who are Definitely Not Idiots :) :) :) Love you". On the cover was a drawing of Rapunzel giving a thumbs up. It was such a nice gift. And very helpful! She checked the Table of Contents. Awkward silences... awkward silences. A-ha! There it was! Awkward Silences, page 48. She flipped to page 48 with lightning speed. Try humor, it said. Alright, now how would she do that? See page 75, Jokes. Rapunzel was always so nice and supportive.

Jokes. Jokes are a great way to ease tension and restore normalcy to social interactions. A classic joke is to play on the natural prejudices of a group. They undoubtedly have some, most likely against their neighbors. Try setting up a hypothetical in which two people, one of their nationality and one of a rival nationality, both enter a bar. Then end with a vaguely racist punchline.

Got it. Plan loaded and ready to execute.

"Knock knock! Does anyone want to hear a joke? A Chilean and an Argentinian walk into a bar," said Anna.

Wait for it. Wait for it. Now! Something vaguely racist.

"You're all niggers," said Anna.

Joke secure. Time for the tension to go down. Anna's stomach rumbled. Now would be a good time for some finger foods. Maybe even some chocolate. They had chocolate, right? They had to have chocolate, it was from South America, after all.

There was a waiter by the snack table, standing stunned.

"Hey, what's up?" said Anna.

No response.

"You don't mind if I just... uhhh... eh? Nah, you don't mind. Alrighty," said Anna.

She grabbed an entire platter of hors d'oeuvres and began to scarf them down.

"So... tell me about yourself," said Anna.

Still no response.

"Okay then. I'll tell you about the things I did. I once went to Indochina. In Siam, there was this dude. He was real mean. And big. And huge. And large. And he had huge guts. So I ripped them out and showed them to him. Oh, and there was also stuff in between that? I mean, I don't go ripping out the guts of people I just met. That'd be weird, huh? Also, I've been to this one place with a really funny name I can't pronounce in Africa. Set one of the locals on fire for being a savage and chucking spearss. But... those spears weren't his penis, in case you get the wrong idea. He went all HUAOHROUSHARAJLAAAHHHHHHRGGHHHAHHHH when he burned. It wasn't totally like that though, because it's really hard to say what he really said while on fire. They must have some voice trainers to do that. It was really interesting. I think travelling the world can really broaden your horizons."

Still no answer. Weird. Maybe he was ignoring her just like Elsa did all those years.

"Okay... bye," said Anna.

As she turned back, she noticed several groups whispering. Years of living dangerously had taught her to listen carefully, and she easily picked out her name several times. They were gossiping about it.

How incredibly rude! And mean! And here she was, trying to be friends with them. Her lip began to wobble.

Then she noticed guards coming from one of the entrances. From their stances, they were ready to administer a beating. From their direction, she inferred their target. There were three entrances. She could bar one with a table and the other one didn't need a key to lock. She had inspected the mechanism on the way in. If these guys were going to be huge jerks and call security on her, so be it. She just wanted to be friends and now they were going to give her a beating. She could either end the night curled up into a ball being beaten by security or... she could beat, fine! If that's how they wanted to tango, she could whiskey tango foxtrot all day. After all, they wouldn't expect it. She would have the element of surprise.

She picked up a passing party midget and threw it at the first guard. He toppled over and she leaped into the air, delivering a side kick into the second. The guard was sent flying. She turned to the third and uppercut his jaw. He fell. She instinctively reached for her saber. It wasn't there. She swore. This was why uniforms were more convenient. She had no hidden weapons like this. Time for plan B. She took the guard's truncheon. She had seen the highest ranking guard earlier. There would be no more than 20 guards. Easy.

She gave a table a single shove and it blocked one door. Then she ran to the other and locked it. The ball-goers were starting to get restless. One threw a chair. They began to fight each other. Well, that made things easier. She went to the last door. A group was waiting there, preparing to enter. They were too slow. She charged them, swinging her club wildly. They panicked and fell easily. That was an easy ten. She turned back. Thud. Thud. Thud. It was the locked door. They were bringing a battering ram to it. She returned to it and unlocked the door. They hit it and fell forward, not expecting it to simply open. She bopped them all on the head. Then she went around the ballroom cleaning up.

All targets neutralized. She stood, alone, victorious! She had won at balls! She had won at the ballroom! She was a winner! It felt good.

Every previous ball had always ended in disaster. This time? She had won. It was a good feeling. It was like she had avenged herself against high society. No kingdom had frozen over. No horses had spontaneously combusted. No one had awkward sex with a marble bust on top of a table. She had won at parties. And she felt confident enough to make it decisive. Yes. She had won at parties forever.

And then she noticed something peculiar. A covered dish with an amazing smell. She walked towards it and checked. It was chocolate! She took a bite. It was silky, smooth, creamy, sweet, luscious. Yes, this was the good stuff. She knew they had it. Now it was all hers. Yes, she had definitely won at parties forever. Won at parties forever and ever. All's well that ends well.

This would be a night to remember. She would definitely have to tell Kristoff the fun he'd missed.

The food was awful. Actually, the food was shit. It gave you the shits. The shits were the shit. I mean, not in the good way. They were really shitty. Getting the shits was about the shittiest shit that could shit up your shit. Shit.

I poked the disgustingly weird meat of my meal. Who ever came up with this shit? Hell, dehydrated water would be better than this. The meat was just so so weird. Maybe it was people. Or distilled sadness. Or jellied puppy. Nah, I have to go with people. It would be terrible if it was people. It certainly seemed almost alive. I poked it again. It jiggled. I gulped, then speared it with his fork. It screamed a little as the prongs pierced its skin. I scowled. This was a goddamn travesty. I moved the little blob to my mouth, opened wide, pinched my nose, and then swallowed.

It wiggled its way down my gullet.

Fucking weird meat. Someone would have to be crazy to like this crap. Or maybe some sort of monster. A meat monster. A meat boy... but stronger. Some sort of super meat boy. Ugh. And it would bleed

everywhere too. Disgusting. It'd be fine if the food didn't give you stomach problems or if it was better. But it was both awful and unhealthy. He looked over. Was Albert almost done with his pooping adventure?

"Fucking hell, we're out of toilet paper," said Albert. He stamped his feet on the ground. "And I still have a little bit of crap stuck to my ass that I need to wipe."

Those were his last words. The outhouse exploded behind him. Albert was filled with shrapnel. He gasped and fell over, dead.

I shit my pants. At least that problem was solved.

"Fritz... what the fuck," I said.

"What are you talking about?" asked Fritz.

"What the fuck? What the fuck is going on?"

"I guess we're at war."

"Yeah, this is dogshit. This sucks."

"Well, I've got a plan at least."

"You've got a plan? What plan could you possibly have?"

"First, I'm not going to die. Then I'm going to go back to Corona and learn metalworking. Then I'll get a nice job in a factory and settle in Eastern Poland. Get a dog, two kids. It'll be nice."

"You're a hopeful one."

"That's just my plan, man."

"Whatever."

"I love cake."

"What?"

"Cake is delicious. A lot of the world's problems would be solved with some pierogi and a few slices of cake. Can you hate anyone that gives you good food?"

"Guess not."

"If everyone could just share a nice meal, the world would be a better place."

Weird Bjork was sitting by himself, gibbering in his nonsense language. Bjorkbjorkbjorkbjorkbjorkbjorkbjorkbjork. Where was he from? Alan? Island? A land? Bleh. Nobody could understand him. It had rained yesterday. Not that that was a good thing. It just made the trenches wetter and more unpleasant. The moisture got everywhere. Had to change your socks all the time.

It was real bad if you couldn't change your socks. Real, real bad. I shuddered a bit thinking about it.

Later that night, the Captain called me in.

"I suppose you don't know why I called you in," said the Captain.

"Yes. Errr, no. Yes? Maybe. I don't know," I replied.

"Good. Surprise is key to warfare. If we don't know what we're doing, the enemy certainly won't."

"So what am I here for?"

"I'm making you into a corporal. You may say, hey, that's not how this works. There are rules. Procedures. There's an order to things! Boy golly, there SURE is. And fuck it. Who cares? Who cares about all those rules?"

"Isn't that a bit of a strange attitude to have?"

"No. It's the most natural attitude in the world. If you care, you start asking questions. And if you ask questions, you realize nothing really makes sense. So why fucking bother? Good question, sir. Yessir, it is. Well, sir, what do we do next? I don't know, sir. We should ask the book."

The Captain downed another shot of vodka. I noticed empty bottles strewn about.

"See, the people that make the rules don't know what the fuck they're doing. I'm high enough to see the faces of the giants we serve and low enough to still get oxygen flowing to my brain. And hell, the air sure is thin up there, but it doesn't change the fact that they're all crazy idiots. So you sign up, corporal, because now you're a chosen one. And the chosen one is the saviour, right? But who the fuck is Joan? Who the fuck is Joan? French slut! Burned to death! Who the fuck is Anna? I'm Anna. You're Anna. We're all Anna. I'm goddamn Gilles de Rais. I kill and rape babies. Look at 'em go."

He stood up and then sat back down. I was still glued to my chair.

"Corporal. Corporal. Funny word. See, you sign up to be the knight in shining. To protect the world. You think you can change things? You think any of us can change things? It's all a big machine! I'm staring at mud, kid. Staring at mud all day. I stare at No Man's Land. And hell, it stares back. You stare at the abyss, fucking abyss stares back. But... that's not true. No, the truth is far bleaker."

He stared me down.

"You see... when you stare into the abyss, they say the abyss stares back. But really... that's you. That's you fucking staring back at yourself. There was never an abyss. They'll say it was a machine's war, a mechanical, industrial war. They'll say that men just got caught up in the crossfire. But you know the truth? We made every inch of this Hell's half mile. We built this inferno to burn our own sins. All of those machines of war? We made them all. Every bit of this is

manmade. That abyss is just the emptiness inside staring back. Staring back."

He paused.

"And if there's death here, and there is... then it's just because we're dead inside. Demons in the guise of men. Welcome to Corporalhood. Have a banana sticker."

He laughed until he was grasping his gut, then fell over. I sat there, paralyzed. Finally, the sound of his snoring stirred me and I left.

"If the young kaiser had any brains, he would see this as the golden opportunity it was. By condemning this Ottoman brutality, he could worm his way back into the good graces of France. Austria would only have two choices after that. It could abandon its Turk allies and become diplomatically isolated. Or it could stay loyal and be dismissed as a backwards and Oriental power. Corona would be secure for another twenty years. But he is a fool. Corona is doomed." - Bismarck

Shadows spoke to Abdul Hamid II. They told him of ancient fortunes restored. He tried to ignore them. Sometimes. Sometimes. The long clock arm went tick tick tick, tocking away at the ticking of the time trickling away. The shadows lengthened and they grew. Abdul Hamid threw his hands up and laughed.

They had feared his ascension, that much was certain. The nobles had thought him destructive. They laughed at him. They feared him. They were right to! The darkness always fears the coming of the light because it is helpless to resist.

His enemies were now legion, but had he not destroyed all that dared challenge him before?

The hypocrites laughed at him. Who were they to laugh? Abdul Hamid leaned against the grandfather clock and groaned. The moon

was cloaked in darkness tonight. Clouds held the sky prisoner. Who were they to laugh? Had they not shed blood as well? Did the French not kill millions for a far less worthy cause? No matter.

He was the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and inheritor of all of Rome's splendor. It could not end now. He took a flask and swallowed some water. The coolness massaged his throat. He coughed and sputtered. He screamed. No one heard. The clock continued to tick.

Footsteps coming down the hall. An assassin?

No. The Grand Vizier.

"It is time to leave," said the Vizier.

"We should destroy Istanbul before the unclean ones touch it," replied Abdul Hamid.

The Grand Vizier nodded in agreement.

"But how?" asked the Vizier. "It is certainly impossible."

The Sultan scowled. This man in front of him. He had started as one of many, distinguishing himself from the other Albanians of the empire. He had risen to governorship of Konya. He was fluent in many languages. Why was such a man a fool? Perhaps this was why the empire was now falling. No, not falling. Misstepping. Corrections could still be made. The streets of Istanbul could still run red with the blood of cowards and traitors.

"Gas, you idiot," said Abdul Hamid. "We shall gas all the streets of Istanbul. The mustard will sear their skin and melt their flesh. Let the people enjoy their republic. I will give them a new form of air to complement their new government."

Abdul Hamid grinned his sharktooth grin.

"It is not logistically possible," said Vizier.

It was.

"We must leave it be. There is no resisting the revolutionaries now," said the Vizier.

True. Technically. Resistance was possible, but defeat was inevitable. The enemy had too many men and they were pressed on all fronts.

"Damnable fools, all of them. The contemptible Arabs don't realize that we have brought them into the light of Europe and civilization. What did the old Caliphates ever do? Nothing. They cavorted in their own filth, coasting on the ruins of Greece for a time before their own barbaric nature drove them into destroying the few beautiful things they had," said Abdul Hamid.

He stared at the Vizier's eyes.

"And the slavs. They were apes, prostrating themselves in imitation of their betters. What did they have? Petty kingdoms, petty 'empires' that wasted no time in bending knee. No, what they had was less than nothing. Dirt and slime. Nothing but meat. No souls for them. No brains. Just meat," said Abdul Hamid. "Like meat, it is only good for consumption. Blood to lubricate the wheels of government."

The Vizier said nothing.

"How debased they all are. They cast down the old things. I have inherited an empire reaching back more than two thousand years. It is the most ancient of all things. Do they think it will fall so easily? And if it does fall, what glory is there in destroying that which is most hallowed and storied? There is nothing in it. This Committee is a guild of the damned. These Young Turks. Ha! Yes, Young Turks. Their own name shows their blatant disregard for the true and the good. They value youth over the preservation of old glory and knowledge. But what happens when all that is gone? There will be no base. Society will degenerate. Whores and filth will fill the streets. The world will collapse! No, we must strike back. We shall strike

back. Rome has stood for over two thousand years. I inherited Rome. I will pass it on in turn!" said the Sultan.

"You must go," said the Vizier.

"Yes. This is no retreat. This is no surrender. It is a tactical move. The empire will return. It will strike back. It always does. Rome cannot fall. It is impossible. What sort of world would we live in if Rome could fall? If this mother of the world could be killed and killed forever, and killed for nothing? If the cinders of civilization could be snuffed out and fade forever? It would be an ugly world."

The sultan boarded his plane. He departed.

The week before the end had been odd.

Weird Bjork had been shot.

It was a stray bullet, probably. Just someone firing wildly. But he had been struck in the neck. It was quick. We gathered around his corpse. It twitched a few times and then stopped. Blood drained from it until the flesh was pale. For a time, we were silent.

Friedrich broke the silence.

"Well, something's got to be done about the body," said Friedrich.

Jakob began to laugh. We all glared at him.

Then he started panting. He started muttering "Bjork" over and over under his breath. Friedrich raised an eyebrow. So did I.

Then, before we could stop him, he leaped over the trench and began to sprint across No Man's Land at full speed, shouting "Bjork" the whole way. The Captain came running over. He leveled his pistol at Jakob.

He lowered his pistol.

"It's not worth the bullet. I mean, why waste money? A virtuous man should strive for frugality and the other good things," he said with a smile. "Early to bed, early to rise, early bird, God helps those who help themselves, all the nice stuff. Have a nice day, everyone."

Only a week later, it was time to die.

And we all knew it.

The Captain was silent as he motioned for us to leave the trench.

We walked forward. There was a rolling barrage covering us, and we moved behind it. Artillery was putting a wall of steel and fire in front of us. Shells rained down only meters forward of us, tossing up dirt and mud. We were caught up in the roaring immensity of the whole thing. We were clockwork men, wound up and puttering on.

To the right of me, I spied a corpse. It had been left here, here in the muds. The persistent rain of steel had not ruined it yet. It was bloated and sickly white, slimy, scratchy molds obscuring what once was flesh. The face was sloughing off, melting into a distorted mockery of humanity. As I looked, the gas of the belly split it open, the fetid last gasp of a rotting ghost. Inside, maggots squirmed amongst greasy, rotting guts.

If I could've smelled the death stench of it, I would have gagged. But the world was already suffused in the charming sweet odor of roasting meat. It was the kind of smell that got up in your nose and never really left. It was the kind of smell that got up in your mind and ate holes in it to nest it, burrowing its little den and worming in, a smell that would live in your brain forever. Parasitic. Fragrant.

We kept walking forward, the darkness broken by the light of the fire guarding us. The artillery continued to work its magic. The wall of steel held.

Over to the side, another group of soldiers was engulfed by a cloud of poison gas. Chemical reactions transformed it into acid as it contacted them, burning them away. They dissolved. I looked away.

They began to fire on us. A few of us went down with wordless gasps. They couldn't scream. The air was knocked out of them. Others had their limbs torn off and simply stopped and fell out of disbelief. No one would be coming back for them.

If I had to go, I decided, I'd rather just die. Better to die than to wait in the muds, screaming all around, the dampness seeping into my wounds and the insects chewing at my flesh. Better to go out quickly than to feel everything slipping away, to suffer in helpless impotence.

I watched as they felled us. There was a pattern to it. They were sweeping us back and forth.

And then they were going down again. I made a split second decision.

It was a bad one. The next shots were going to go for Fritz. I shoved him aside. I don't know why. The bullets hit me. I fell over. I was dying, and I was dying for the stupidest fucking reasons. Why would I even do that? Fucking hell. My gun was just out of reach. I had dropped it when I was hit. I stretched my arm. No good. I twisted my body around. Then I kicked my leg out and tried to drag it back. My leg pushed through the mud. I hooked my foot around the stock of the gun. I dragged it back. Finally, I could reach it. I turned it around. I pointed it at my head. I pulled the trigger.

The heat was unbearable. Fritz began to weep uncontrollably, the mud threatening to pull him under and drown him. Slowly but surely, he continued to lift his feet up and plod them back down. He was panting. No Man's Land stretched onwards into eternity. Beside him, another soldier was shot. His head burst apart, splattering Fritz with brain matter and blood. His jacket was drenched in the flesh and bile of his dead friends. His throat was hoarse. He could not tell if he was screaming any more, the noise of falling shells had broken his ears.

Only dull mechanical buzzing remained. But if he was not screaming, then he very much wished to scream. His jacket was heavy. His jacket was bloody. It was hot. Unbearably hot.

He continued to stride forward. The bullets whizzed through the air around him. Another man fell. He could not stop to see his face. There was no time. Hesitation would be death. Ahead, the Captain suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Oh dear me," said the Captain. "It appears I have been shot."

Then he smirked, saluted one last time, and dropped dead. A shell dropped nearby. Someone was thrown to the ground. He began to cough. Blood came out. Then his jacket slumped and fell open. The man had been pulped, his body reduced to a thick jelly. The man fell over and dissolved into the earth, goo congealing on the desolate muds.

Fritz tried to march further, but he could not. The heat was pressing too hard. Fritz reached for the buttons of his jacket and undid them, then threw the jacket aside. His body was soon painted with a fresh coat of blood. He continued marching.

The enemy trench came into sight. The machine gun fire halted. Fritz's eyes widened in animalistic hatred. He tore off his pants and undergarments and charged.

The Englishman in charge of the machine gun had stopped because the Welshman beside him had off-handedly made a comment about fucking sheep. As soon as he turned around, he was confronted with the sight of a naked Cornish man covered in blood screaming "Kurwa!" repeatedly at the top of his lungs. His shock only grew when the strange naked man threw down his rifle, curled up into a ball, and began to sob and shake.

The Brits captured Fritz. But that wasn't the end of his story. He was sent back, towards the city, but along the way, the car he was in broke down. Fritz escaped into the woods.

Unfortunately, Fritz had never paid attention in geography. Furthermore, he had no compass. And even if he had one, he had never learned how to use one. Fritz wandered deeper and deeper into the woods until he collapsed from exhaustion, falling asleep on a furry rock.

That rock was actually a bear. Fortunately for Fritz, the bear's senses had been severely impaired. Many years ago, it had tussled with a local hunter, and had been injured for its efforts. The bear woke up before Fritz did. It began to run. Despite its great size, it was able to move at speeds of thirty miles per hour. By the time Fritz woke up, he had travelled a great distance.

At this time, a young woman was debating with her friend. She and her friend lived in a small, sleepy French village. This young woman did not want to get married. No man was good enough. Her friend jokingly asked if she thought men grew on trees.

"I might marry one if they did," said the young woman.

It would be incredibly cliché and tiresome if young Fritz fell from a tree at that moment. Luckily for us, he didn't. Instead, he barrelled onto the scene riding a bear and screaming "Dziwka" as loudly as he could. The bear came to a stop. Fritz fell off.

"Who are you?" asked the woman's friend.

"Kurwa mac! Pizda..." replied Fritz groggily.

The young woman sighed. Though it hadn't been a tree, it was close enough. She supposed she would have to get married now. So she did. Thus, Louise became Mrs. Pizda. After seven years, Fritz was finally able to speak French fluently. Of course, by then, it was far too awkward to inform his wife that he was in fact, not Kurwamac Pizda, but instead Fritz von Nagorzyce. So he let things be. Thus, Fritz came to spend the rest of his days in Doncourt-lès-Longuyon.

At times, his children and grandchildren would ask him why he was always so accepting of things. His response was always the same.

"Nie przyszła góra do Mahometa, Mahomet przyszedł do góry."

Of course, his children and grandchildren only spoke French.

It was the middle of the night. He stood outside the castle door, waiting. He knew not what he waited for. Did he want a sign? Or perhaps he just wished the wicked night earth to swallow him up and save him the humiliation of return.

Life could be so cruel. It holds out beauty and charm just to take it away. How could he face her like this? The mask weighed heavily on his face. The porcelain smile chafed on his burnt skin. It was a good mask because it could smile for him. It could smile and he no longer could. He stretched his hand out to knock and pulled it back again. He laid down.

He had already waited for thirty minutes, but perhaps he would wait for an hour more. Perhaps he would even wait for dawn. The rising sun would melt him away like the pathetic little homunculus he was. Life was agony. He wished he could tear his skin off like a suit and don a new one.

The door opened. She was waiting there.

"Darling! You can't look at me," said Prince Charming.

"I'm looking at you right now," replied Cinderella.

"But you mustn't!"

"Why not?"

"Because I have become far too horrible to look at."

"That's silly. You're being silly. Take off that mask."

"I could never grieve the woman of my dreams like that."

"Eh?"

"Who could love a monster?"

"I know I've entered menopause, but you're being a little melodramatic, aren't you?"

"I'm the monster. Just look at me!"

"I'd love to, but you won't let me."

Henry peeled off the mask. The right side of his face was covered in scars and flaking off. His left eyelid had melted and fused with the skin above it. His right one was gone. His nose had burned off, leaving only a gaping hole. His lips had seared to nothing, leaving his teeth permanently bared in grimace. Most of his hair was gone, and probably gone forever, leaving only vague tufts here and there.

"You see? I'm... grotesque," said Henry.

"Oh, it's not so bad. I was expecting worse."

"What?"

"I can't say that I'm happy with it, but I can live with it."

"But I'm horrific."

"So are periods, but I've lived with those for decades."

"I'm deformed."

"And I'm pushing the years myself. I'm not much of a looker anymore either."

"What about the others? People will judge us."

"For one, who cares? For two, you're talking to a refined lady here. Makeup is magic. A nice little wig, a bit here and there, and you're good as... semi-used! Really, that's good enough."

"But-"

"But nothing. What do you think love means? I told you I loved you, didn't I? Love means you love all of a person. I put up with your flaws and I appreciate your nice side. Anyone can love someone that's perfect. The true test of love is when something goes wrong. So we'll get through this together!" said Cinderella.

Then she took a deep breath.

"Because I don't give up. Not when they forced me to be a scullery maid, not when there was... that... timey... wimey... magic... curse... stuff..."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, it's nothing. The point is that we can do this! I love you. Do you love me?"

"With all my heart."

"Then stay with me. And come inside, you'll catch your death of cold."

They lived happily ever after.

Failure. It was the only way to describe what had happened.

His country had counted on him and he had failed.

He stared the pearl handled pistol down.

When he saw the terms of the treaty, he was outraged. His fellow diplomats had dragged him away as he screamed at them and the

foreigners. He had one last moment of clarity before they pulled him from the room.

"One day, I may forgive you. History may forgive you. But the Coronan people will never forgive you."

He had shouted those words at those cold-faced British and stonehearted Americans. They had not looked at him.

The diplomat wished to be at peace.

Chunks of pinkish-gray brain matter hit the small statue of the Virgin Mary behind him.

A peace settled over the bedroom. The good diplomat had bid farewell to arms.

Author Notes: In case any of you speak Polish or German, here are more detailed rules of Coronan grammar. My goal in writing them was to create a monstrous and disgusting hybrid language that was both alien yet understandable. It should feel very strange, almost correct, but off somehow.

BONUS CONTENT: (Written in-universe format)

"Living with the Coronans is enough to convince anyone that there is a God. Learning Coronan is enough to convince anyone that He is evil." - Anonymous

There are seven genders, more or less capturing all documented words: German female, Polish female, German male, Polish male, German neuter, Polish neuter, and Mathematical neuter. German male, Polish female, and German neuter use German declension rules and suffixes. German female, Polish male, Polish neuter, and Mathematical neuter are declined according to Polish rules. Adjectives are always declined in Polish fashion regardless of origin. For example, one might say that the cat is crispy. We have "kot",

"jest", and "knusprig". As knusprig is an adjective, it must be declined according to Polish rules. As such, it assumes the nominative form. Kot jest knusprig. Let us say we wish to use rich as a noun and indirect object. We start with the base word "bogaty". We decline it to the feminine noun of "bogata". Because it is now a female Polish gendered noun, we now decline according to German rules. We pluralize by adding "-n" and end with "bogatan". Because it is plural, we use "den": "den Bogatan". If the subject of a sentence was found to be of German gender, despite not being an articulated language normally, German articles would be used. If the subject was dropped, but the verb and object were both of German gender, then the subject was implied to be German gendered even if the word for the dropped subject would normally be Polish gendered, resulting in article use.

Des braun wysoka Mensch ma albanischego das Bucha.

The brown tall man owns an Albanian book.

Des gruby Junge nie ma die rechtmäßige Lebensraum.

The fat boy does not have his rightful living space.

Warszawa jest schöni.

Warsaw is beautiful.

Words originally of Polish or German origin have shifted to the other side in gender over the years.

Schießen der nowym Karabinia.

[I] shoot with my new rifle.

In this case, rifle became German female from Polish male due to the tendency of German troops to feminize their guns.

Quorum

Rapunzel hummed to herself as she trimmed the hedge. It was nice, orderly, and pretty.

Every plant and flower was in its proper position. The world was as it should be. You could set your watch to the chirping of the songbirds. That was entirely intentional. Darwin had become the talk of every party, and Corona needed a response in the scientific race that had embroiled the world. She had hired dozens of the finest minds the nascent field of biology had to offer, having them catalogue the behavior of the local fauna. It wasn't just to have an orderly garden, it was a matter of national prestige. Of course, the garden was nice too.

A footman presented the Kaiserin with a letter. She paused, took the letter, then began to read. She folded it back up and turned to the footman.

Very calmly, she said: "Please fetch me a cup of coffee."

The footman soon returned with the coffee. She took the cup, let the fragrant scent waft to her nose, sipped a few times, then finally swallowed up the coffee in one big gulp. Then she faced the hedges and spat the coffee out.

"She what?!" screamed Rapunzel.

The diplomat wagged his finger at the Kaiserin.

"And furthermore, she knocked out one of my teeth, and she was very rude, and she insulted my friend's mother, and she ate all the chocolates, and she stole my wallet, and she made a baby cry, and she hoisted up the Treasurer's underpants on a flagpole, and she set

some flowers on fire, and she's a big meanie mean-pants with a stupid face, and I demand reparations and a formal apology!"

Well, this was a mess. Luckily, there was always a way out.

After all, greed would always trump dignity.

"I'm very sorry about this whole affair," said Rapunzel. She made her best puppy dog face.

"As very well you should be! The whole matter has been utterly absurd! An insult of the greatest magnitude!" shouted the man.

"So is our little training arrangement still in effect?" asked Rapunzel.

"We'll have to seriously rethink all of our agreements."

"That's really too bad. You know, my cousin is getting on in years. Sometimes her judgement isn't exactly the best. But she means well. Just a frail old lady now, though, albeit one who remembers her training..."

Rapunzel trailed off. The diplomat composed himself then prepared to unleash another verbal barrage. Then the glint of realization appeared in his eyes.

"It would be good to plant a Chilean flag on the Piramide de Mayo, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would be good. I think I was a bit hasty earlier. I'm sure La Moneda will be more than willing to overlook this tiny little incident. Not a problem at all."

The Coronan support of Chile was not driven by any sort of grander South American geopolitical strategy. It was devised to serve as a distraction. Bismarck planned to preemptively divide Africa, allowing Europe to avoid petty colonial squabbles and possible escalations of

violence. However, this meant he needed support at home. As always, he had the full and unconditional support of the Kaiserin. More and more, however, things were growing complicated. It was his habit to simply turn public opinion on and off, manufacturing mass sympathy or outrage as desired. Unfortunately, the rise of mass media and its magnates was making that far more difficult. It was becoming increasingly necessary to bend to the bloodlust of the general public over the cool, sociopathic calculations of sound governance. Bismarck did not plan to take any African colonies. They were unnecessary and added a cumbersome overseas burden when Corona's main focus was Europe. A navy would be expensive and would aggravate Great Britain. However, this would upset the common folk and irritate their jingoist tendencies if they found out. And, thanks to advances in news technology, they were certain to find out. Annoyingly, the world was becoming a very free and open place. The jingos would have to be satisfied. The people needed to be placated with a show.

South America was the perfect place for such a show. Asia was a major theatre of international competition. Africa was being carved up. While the Americans had issued their Monroe Doctrine, it held very little force. They did not have the power projection to back it up. Besides, Corona had personal connections to President Grant. Military training and technology made its way across the Atlantic, modernizing and reforming the Chilean army. The Paraguayan War would be Chile's chance. Paraguay went to war against the Triple Alliance of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Brazil had occupied Uruguay and President Lopez of Paraguay, who had inherited the country from his father, was rightly worried that the powers of South America meant to put the continent under their boots. If one small country could be so easily puppeted, what did that mean for Paraguay? Paraguay's army was well-trained and disciplined, but grievously outnumbered. The entire country had only 500,000 men. Though they won early victories, the war soon turned against them and it became a desperate struggle for survival. They were being annihilated. Chile chose to flex its new military might and step in.

By the time the Chileans arrived, 40% of Paraguay's pre-war population was already dead. The entire female population of the country had been tapped to perform war labor. Children were being stripped of their toys and sent to die. Officers went shoeless-and considered it a blessing. Better shoeless than half-naked. They had run out of clothes. Into this grim battle marched 200,000 Chilean troops. The expeditionary force was about as large as the country itself. The Chileans had not been expecting this. The savage brutality of the surviving Paraguayans shocked them to the core. They had swapped stories of fearsome Amazons prior to entering to the country with a mixture of titillation and condescension, but the reality of the situation was nothing like they had predicted. Of course, such was to be expected. After all, those still left alive had seen all of their friends and family die, had made new friends in the army, and then they saw all of them die too. Sprinkle in a little rape and pillage, and they were understandably a little upset. Nevertheless, when the Chileans returned home, they would return with chilling tales. And these tales, like all tales, would only grow in the telling.

The Chileans defeated the Triple Alliance in several battles, culminating in a decisive Chilean victory at the Battle of Isla Lambare. Brazil and its allies had sought hegemony over the La Plata Basin. However, Chile forced the three nations to sue for peace. By this time, they were off the Coronan leash. Rapunzel was dead and the jingos had stopped caring. It was enough that Corona flex its muscles, and having done so, they promptly forgot about South America. Bismarck had been run out of office, only having enough political clout to ensure his Berlin Conference went as planned. Chile was now free. The war had dragged for twelve years, utterly ravaging Paraguay. Chile forced the Triple Alliance to pay heavy reparations towards the Paraguayan state. These reparations would not be used to rebuild. 70% of the Paraguayan population had perished. Of the adult male population, more than 90% were dead. The President himself had died in battle. Only two months after the war was over, Chilean soldiers occupied Paraguay and declared it to be a protectorate. Seven years after that, it was annexed into Chile.

It would not regain independence until 1984, its freedom coming as part of the democratization of the Chilean junta.

Having won one major victory, Chile now turned its attention towards its other neighbors. It sent an expeditionary force of ten thousand men to secure strategic saltpeter reserves. It effortlessly swept aside its opposition, annexing all target lands to itself. Chile stood triumphant.

And Brazil slipped downwards. The Monroe Doctrine was just a piece of parchment. Nevertheless, the Americans had strong interests in South America. The US was unable to press its interests as strongly as it could earlier, being countered by the existence of a strong Brazil. In an attempt to weaken Brazil, French and Coronan agents had egged on the efforts of aristocrats and others upset with the regime of Pedro II. They were comparatively few in number, and the agitators soon gave up the effort. In truth, such actions likely had little to no effect in the long term. South America was a place of interest for France from the mid-century onwards. Latin America, a term invented by academics and scholars, was taken by the regime and used as a propaganda tool in order to wedge South America away from Spain and towards a pan-Latin identity that included other Roman successor states, the strongest of which was France. When the Brazilian Empire abolished slavery, the dissidents struck.

It was a quiet coup. The soldiers did not wish to remove their beloved Emperor. They begged him to order them not to, to force them to resist. It would be very easy to turn their rifles back on the traitorous dogs that had ordered the coup. He refused. Blood would not be spilled as he departed. The crowds wept as he departed. They could sense that it was the end of the an era. Though the South American nations had experienced birthing pains and infighting that had disgusted Bolivar himself, the century would ultimately turn out to be a peaceful and prosperous one. The same could not be said of the next century. Pedro II was exiled to France. Pedro could have stopped the coup. But he was weary. Years of rule had worn him down, and he had accepted the inevitable fall of the

monarchy ever since the death of his sons. He had educated his daughter and heir, but kept her away from the practical realities of government. By then, the French had come to believe their own propaganda. As part of their duty to Latin America, the Emperor offered to restore Pedro. Pedro refused. South America was now ripe for the taking.

Napoleon II epitomized power. He had grown up very distant from his mother. He had seen only the facade of power she projected. He had only the barest inkling of her self-loathing and the long nights she spent praying for death to come. The second half of the century was the golden age of pure power politics, unfettered by dynastic concerns or the coming rise of cosmopolitan liberalism. Napoleon II believed in power. His government would be legitimized by the Napoleonic legacy. For both France and Corona, enlightened absolutism was alive and well. Napoleon II marketed himself as the defender of the French revolution and its values. Egalitarianism was under threat, and Napoleon II would be its greatest ally. Darwin had revolutionized the field of biology. It was inevitable that his ideas would spread. Social Darwinism began to take root. There was a certain hierarchy of races and peoples. Whites were, of course, at the top, being absolutely superior and most fit. But amongst even white men, there were superior and inferior breeds. Common folk began to speak of a coming clash of the nations that would decide which countries would be "living" and which ones would be "dead", the living ones then being free to conquer the Earth and populate it with their supreme breed of men. Napoleon II absolutely despised Social Darwinism. He viewed it as the cretinous misinterpretation of very sophisticated ideas by lower class bumpkins seeking to inflate their own egos despite their own lack of power and importance. In France, talk of Social Darwinism was banned and those found to be spreading were subject to severe punishments. By no means did Napoleon II think racially. Long gone were the days when a hearty Christian man might call for the aid of a noble zebra-striped half-Moor, a dark-skinned man from the lands of Prestor John, or a virtuous heathen steppe warrior, siding with these exotic men over

demonic Muslims and treacherous neighbors. Nor did he live in a world fully conscious of genocide and racial terror. He was a product of his time. Rather, he was a product of his mother's time. As the world plunged deeper and deeper into Social Darwinism and dreams of a coming international apocalypse, he stood by the ideals of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. His White Man's burden was not the White Man's burden, for there were plenty of white men for which he had nothing but unbridled contempt. It was the French Man's Burden. There was an entire world out there full of non-French people, that, given attention and a bit of impolite coercion, could be made into new Frenchmen. Anyone had the potential to be French, they just had to embrace Enlightenment equality and French culture. If the whole world was French, then men would not be judged by nationality or creed (because they would all be French), but by the content of their character. This would not necessarily be done humanly. Though, if possible, he would simply impose culture without violence, conquering the world through cultural imperialism rather than outright violence. For him, it was a dream worth fighting for.

But the genie had already escaped the bottle. As soon as he died, the people abandoned his ideals. The world was moving on. He was a reactionary in that respect, clinging to ideas the world claimed were out of date. The future was speaking, and the future said that there was a master race, and this master race would destroy or subjugate all opposition. Such was the path of progress! Narrow definitions were drawn. Finns were Asians (until the United States made a court ruling suggesting otherwise, forcing a change in stance in law, trickling down to books). Coronans were Asians too (too much fraternizing with the asiatic Russian enemy, and were the Sarmatians not nomads?). And, of course, the Italians were the whitest of them all, having founded Rome, mother of the world. And, of course, it would be absurd to consider the Mediterraneans part of the white race, their genes having been polluted by Moors, Turks, and other such subhuman fellows. The Irish were mere apes, literal gorillas that had barely enough intelligence to talk, let alone think. Africa began at the Pyrenees. The Scandinavians had never done anything other than rape and pillage their neighbors, continuously

destroying knowledge. The Germans were the original barbarians who destroyed the Roman Empire. Knives were sharpened. It was time to purge the world of mud. Identities are quite curious. To wage politics based on identity is to fight for something you have not earned, to fight for an accident of birth. Even class discrimination is flawed because circumstances can easily force into poverty or wealth. And because they are identities and not classes, it is even more dubious, as it is not even based of an objective evaluation of merit.. A person can be described a million different ways, given a million different identities, all true. Identity is a mask to make understandable the infinitely complex reality of a person. It is easy, convenient, and practical to see someone as the composite of their identities. But it is not complete. When one bases politics on identity, one supplants the man with the mask.

And a mask is always hollow.

Across the continent, another country took a different path. In France, Napoleon II had continued the dream of his father. Power was king. All people were one people. Napoleon II ruled with absolute power and preached liberal ideals. Austro-Germany was the exact opposite. In 1848, Austria died and Austro-Germany rose from the ashes. Of the many revolutions that raged that year, the Austrian one was the only one to achieve its intended goals, though it can be argued that the other revolutions were still successful in their own way. At Frankfurt, they succeeded in upending the entire established social order. Men and women both received the right to vote. Democracy was instated. A constitution was drafted. At first, only Germans (this referring to Germans in the Holy Roman Empire and not Austria proper, as Austrians were a subset of the German people), Austrians, and Hungarians were recognized as true citizens. However, after a series of secondary revolts in 1849, the constitution was revised and a limited amount of power was devolved to local ethnic governments. It was an imperfect compromise, but it would hold for the next few decades. The drafters looked upon their work and were pleased. The constitution created was not perfect, but it

reflected their country, and thus, was beautiful even in its imperfection. It was a tad bit awkward. But it did accurately reflect the multicultural empire. After all, the title of Emperor Francis during the Napoleonic Wars had been Emperor of Austria, King of Jerusalem, Hungary, Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia, and Lodomeria, Archduke of Austria, Duke of Lorraine, Salzburg, Wurzburg, Franken, Styria, Carinthia and Carniola, Grand Duke of Krakow, Prince of Transylvania, Margrave of Moravia, Duke of Sandomir, Masovia, Lublin, Upper and Lower Silesia, Auschwitz and Zator, Teschen and Friule, Prince of Berchtesgaden and Mergentheim, Princely Count of Habsburg, Goritz and Gradisca, and Margrave of Upper and Lower Lausitz and Istria. Every domain, great and small, was included. Such was the organization of the new country. Though some ethnic groups may have had more political importance than others, they were all placed into one multicultural tapestry, and the Empire was more than the sum of its parts. This idea was illustrated by the tall man and short man analogy. The tall man might be more immediately respected, but they both need each other. The tall man reaches the high places the short man cannot, and the short man can go through the small spaces and passages that stymie the tall man. If one denies the other, both are doomed. In time, the analogy was applied to the German question itself. It became the answer to the unification question. There would be two Germanies, the tall man and the short man. The Prussians valued centralization. They had concentrated power and attempted to Germanize the Poles. Of course, the Poles would ultimately become the majority in the Empire, and so, as Germanization grew more and more tepid, they ultimately opted to Polonize themselves. By contrast, the Austrians let the Holy Roman Empire stay fragmented for centuries. They ruled a great deal of lands, and those lands had preserved their own unique cultures. It was a mosaic rather than a melting pot. The Prussians were more orderly and serious. The Austrians loved fun and were more laid-back. The difference was even apparent in the opera and theatre of the time. Wagner actively funded drama and historically minded productions. Every work was to inspire a specific kind of feeling and to do so with the utmost sophistication. Theatre in Austro-Germany came to be

dominated by the will of the masses. They produced mostly comedies and were happy to do so. The German question had been settled peacefully, and all agreed that the solution was agreeable. Kleindeutsche Losung, Grossdeutsche Losung, centralized, decentralized, all these questions would produce winners and losers. If the country remained fragmented, then by what means would they be unified? If it was centralized under one power, the legacy of the other would be buried and steadily forgotten. Better to have two Germanies. One as the tall man and one as the short. Rivals at times, but always bonded by blood. Statesmen like Bismarck rushed to construct a stable order out of the answer. However, the trials of the powerful did not bother the people. The people were happy, and that was enough.

Austro-Germany settled into a holding pattern, keeping with conservative values and the old order as the rest of the world changed. That might seem peculiar, but one only has to examine their voting population to understand why. The engines of change are often the rich and powerful. Early adoption of new technologies can lead to great wealth and prosperity, especially for the elite few that lead the way, however, such changes always trample many whose lifestyles depended on the old ways. The primary concerns of the poor farmers and factory workers involved basic rights, little freedoms, and living standards. Having been satiated, they became a bulwark against future change. New machines would drive craftsmen out of business. More efficient factories would reduce the need for manual labor, thus reducing the amount of jobs. Every great change had the potential to crush the little people, the common folk. Now that the common folk had power, they resisted almost all such changes. Of course, since the government was representative, even their representatives would occasionally ignore the will of the people when reform or modernization was absolutely required. But for the most part, the nation stayed conservative.

Britain and France both considered themselves the prime liberal force of the era. Their methods were very different. Great Britain always preferred the irresistible logic of finance over force of arms,

though it could use the latter when necessary. It divided and conquered. Lines on a map, arbitrary creation of ethnicities, the clever use of espionage, private agents, and diplomats. Britain ruled subtly and effectively. France preferred brute force. People would be taken into the glory of civilization and they would like it. It was a long standing division. War was the French business, and the French were very good at their business. Meanwhile, Britain's natural isolation but lack of manpower led it towards the use of geographic barriers and manipulation to project power. In the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had fought with funding and propaganda to spread its ideals. Napoleon, meanwhile, attempted to bring the revolution and the new order at the ends of bayonets. The British Empire often expanded because of scrappy independents. Each expansion of the French Empire was personally calculated by Napoleon II. Though, in practice, both sides exploited their colonies for resources and material gain, Britain often patronized or at least did not destroy local culture while France sought to Frenchify. France would even go as far as to make the crown jewel of its empire, Algeria, into a department of France, marking it as true and integral piece of the homeland. Algeria wasn't just a French colony, it was part of France proper. The world was divided between the two powers. Following the succession of Eugene I to the Coronan throne, the Bismarckian order was broken. France needed an ally. Britain's oldest ally, Portugal, had ceased to be globally important. An alliance of convenience was forged. They soon found that their rivalries had made them very similar in the end. These bonds would only grow stronger in the furnace of the First World War. In an ever tenser world, as more and more petty categories were formed and alliances disintegrated, two nations had become friends.

No one had expected the mass destruction of the First World War. Colonial conquests and the relatively quick and painless wars of the last century had built up a sense of invincibility in Europe. In Corona, dissent grew at an alarming rate. Prior to the war, most knew Pilsudski as only a radical clawing at the fringes of society. By 1906, a significant portion of the Coronan army was defecting to Pilsudski's

rebels. The structure of the army collapsed. Officers became akin to miniature warlords. It is curious that the war still struggled on for a few more months. Even as the war effort totally collapsed, some were devoted to the mission, as nebulous as that mission was. Pilsudski's troops pushed the Coronan army westward, finally stopping at the Oder river. It was a calculated halt. As peace terms were settled, the allies tried briefly to end the "revolt". Their offensives were unsuccessful and Pilsudski negotiated very favorable peace terms for his new Polish nation. Allied reparations would be foisted onto a newly formed Prussian Republic of Corona, carved out of the Coronan lands Pilsudski had not conquered. Alsace-Lorraine was handed back to France. Pilsudski turned his attention eastward. He knew the rising communist threat in the east would be the great trial of the era. At the very least, he felt it. Poland would need allies to combat the Red Menace. Germany was a natural choice. But allying with Germany threatened all his of work preserving Polish culture. It was a choice between his people's lives and their souls.

But this was a man who had brought down two of the world's mightiest empires through his force of will. He would forge his own path forward. Tensions were growing on the Russo-Polish borders. When those tensions boiled over into open conflict, Pilsudski went to personally lead the army. The country had had a long and storied cavalry tradition. These ideas were updated to the modern age. With lightning speed, mechanized infantry and tanks pushed into Russia. The assault was spearheaded by the armored Sarmatian Guard, the direct descendents of the old institution of Kingdom Guards. Pilsudski won victory after crushing victory, easily sweeping the Russian army aside. Soon enough, he was at the gates of Moscow.

The German government was replaced in the peace. The fracturing of Austro-Germany was relatively peaceful. As they had government structures already in place, all that was necessary was to upgrade these institutions. The French placed puppets into power, eager to extract resources from Germany to pay for their own immense war costs. The Germans would complain about the draconian nature of

the treaty, and it was quite draconian, but in truth, they would have imposed an equally harsh peace on France. Indeed, the treaty was not so abnormal considering treaties in the past. Treaties had not changed. The world had. In the 19th century, when the Irish were starving, though others were concerned, they still had not stopped the British while they had ruthlessly extracted wealth from a starving nation. Not only had they not stopped the British, the Coronans had actually given their approval in exchange for British approval of their actions in Iceland. Iceland had been shuffled around several times in the first half of the century, finally ending in Arendellan hands. However, the people of Iceland were not happy to be governed as a colony. When the revolutions of 1848 broke out, the Icelanders began to think about their own fate. When Queen Elsa died, they made their move. However, Corona was building towards its own unification plan. Any political instability would undermine it and risk the failure of a long and intricate plan. Rebellion could not be tolerated in such a delicate climate. General Hohenzollern was dispatched to the island to put them down. She was quite upset. Her sister had just recently died, and the Icelanders were burning her in effigy. She decided to make an example of them. Her experience in Iberia had taught her about dealing with civilian resistance. Such techniques were always quite brutal-concentration camps were invented to deal with Philippine rebels and perfected against the Boers. When they attempted to lock hands and bar her troops entry, she opened fire. Those among the protesters expecting mercy were sorely disappointed. Corona did not tolerate failure. It had sent the Kingdom Guards, the crown's finest. Many of them had killed friends and family personally during the Polish revolts. Killing random civilians was a cakewalk compared to that test of loyalty. For the next six months, Iceland would be put under siege. By the end, they were eating cats and dogs, and it was rumored some had resorted to cannibalism. Their spirits were broken. Iceland would not present trouble for the next seventy years. While harsh, compared to the treatment of rebels in Maldonia, mainland Europe, China, and Iceland, the treatment of the Confederates in the United States was quite merciful, and it could have been even more tempered had Lincoln survived. In such a light, the treaty was not so harsh. They

had merely installed a pliant government and demanded repayment for hefty material and human costs. Germany was stripped of its colonies, but it had few to begin with. The Ottomans lost their land, but their grip was already slipping. As post-war prosperity set in, people forgot their grievances. It was only with the Great Depression that old hatreds rose again.

Democracy became known as the tool of puppet governments, an instrument designed to take Germany for every penny it was worth. After all, hadn't the French suppressed any criticism of their blatant exploitation and puppeteering? The sums demanded were outrageous! Resentment grew in Germany. They turned to their Coronan cousins, their cousins that had, thanks to Pilsudski, emerged unbowed.

The French were not pleased. With British help, they threatened to attack the exposed Polish-German border. Pilsudski had Moscow at his mercy. But if he stayed, his homeland was doomed. With a heavy heart, he retreated. None would come so close to defeating Russia ever again. Officially, it ended with a white peace. However, the people of Poland saw it as a great victory. They began to celebrate the invincibility of the Polish army. Shouts came out to annex Prussia. Pilsudski refused. It was counter to his own interests. But when an ultimatum came from members of his own government, military officers he bled and fought with, he relented. The Great Powers agreed to the annexation so long as Poland assumed Corona's old war reparations. Tanks rolled into Berlin.

And as the people chanted out that their brothers had returned, Pilsudski knew he had failed. He had rebuilt the country, saved it from national humiliation, stood against the world alone and won, and yet he could not triumph over the hearts and minds of his own people. He died shortly afterwards.

The ball was now rolling. In the 1840s and 1850s, Russia expelled masses of Jews from its Pale of Settlement. Many of them naturally flocked to the sizable Jewish community in Corona. Poland had

historically been home to many Jews, its rulers being very tolerant. It was once said that if a religion did not have practitioners in Poland, it had perished from the face of the earth. The takeover by the Prussian Hohenzollern family had not changed matters. One of the Prussian virtues was Godliness tempered with religious tolerance. "Let all be rewarded as their gods will." However, there were tensions with the immigrants. The native Jews looked down upon the newcomers, seeing them as unintegratable foreigners. During 1848, many of the Russian Jews would ally themselves with revolutionaries and subsequently would be exiled from Corona. However, the unsuccessful revolts did plant the seed of an idea. There was a Jewish nation and Corona was its natural heartland. It was an idea that would become significant in the WWI-WWII interwar period.

Unlike Austro-Germany, the Ottomans had not established stable government institutions to pass onto the Balkan states. They were never meant to be self-governed. When they gained independence, it was chaos. Borders needed to be settled and old grudges abounded. Ethnic boundaries were exceedingly complicated, with groups spilling over into each other. Members of many ethnicities would often have equally good claims to certain pieces of land. In addition, there were many economic troubles creating so-called "excess" people without rewarding work. The rebels soon found themselves as heads of governments, and the wartime economic structures that sustained the rebellions were unable to manage the burdens of peace. Well over half of the rural population was in excess. Those excess people would soon find an outlet in war. These Balkan Wars would be long and grueling, taking up much of the interwar period. In Balkans, there were roughly 1.3 million Jews. As war engulfed the region, more and more poor folk began to blame the Jews for their problems. Pogroms spread. The largest would occur in Kragujevac, where eight hundred Jews would be killed. Most were locked in their own homes and burned alive. This would be a breaking point for the Jewish community in Poland. Action had to be taken.

Jewish nationalism, Coronan nationalism, and racial theories were beginning to run together. A framework was constructed in which the master races were the ones that had managed to prosper despite the opposition of the world. Europe had constantly oppressed the Jews and kept Germany in check. Poland had always been surrounded by foes, and yet it had expanded and been a Great Power for much of its history, dominating Eastern and part of Central Europe from the late 14th century to the middle 17th, when it was crippled by Ukrainian rebellions and the Deluge, then rising again in the early 19th under Kaiserin Rapunzel and Bismarck, standing as one of the world's greatest powers. These races would be the master races. It was not the case that all others were human scum. Other nations also had admirable histories, and for that, they were accorded some degree of respect. Others save the Balkans. To the Coronans, the Balkans seemed to be a desolate wasteland. Unlike them, the citizens of the Balkans had not died for their country. Rather, they had all deliberately used a time of weakness to rebel and break their motherlands for the petty prizes of countries of their own. Then, having succeeded, they proceeded to attack each other rather than build up. It was despicable. Of course, things were not so simple. Many of them had served in the Austro-German army, but had grown bitter just as many Coronans had. The Ottomans had continuously suppressed their native cultures and committed atrocities to maintain stability. Though the new states were highly unstable, they had never been given a stable framework. Everything had to be built from the ground up. By contrast, Poland, Hungary, and Germany had all inherited stable structures from the predecessor states. It did not matter. Blood had to be repaid with blood. With Pilsudski's death, the people became ever more militant. War approached. A slogan spread amongst the people. Slogans are wondrous things. They instill emotion rather than rational thought. Across the nation, people chanted.

"Partition! Never again!"

The Hungarians attempted to intercede and act as a voice of reason. Although democracy had gotten a bad reputation due to the

depredations of the French, it was not time to abandon it yet. If nobility and autocrats can rule, then the people can rule well as well, as both of the former were once the latter. If the people are uneducated in civic matters, they ought to be educated. The baby need not go out with the bathwater. A slight blemish on the democratic system was no reason to abandon it. After all, it had served their ancestors well. Furthermore, all ideals and systems could be corrupted. But the basis of democracy was sound. It was more humane and just because it did not elevate some to high power for no reason other than birth. It prevented excess because the people directly checked government power. It embodied the ideal of the social contract. Following the war, the Hungarian government had granted emergency powers to Admiral Horthy for a year. He put the country into order, convinced Charles von Hapsburg not to attempt a restoration of the monarchy, and then retired, ready to live out the rest of his life in peace. The Hungarian government was mostly composed of elder statesmen. They had been young during the First World War, and many of them had resisted Franz Ferdinand's plans to create a federal system modeled after the US, fearing their loss of power. Now that they could see the results, and having been humbled by old age, many now wished to preach moderate ideals and compromise so that the new generation might not repeat their mistakes.

Instead, the Hungarians were seen as being the ringleaders of the Balkan plot. Hadn't radical Hungarians assassinated Emperor Franz Ferdinand? Didn't they deadlock the Reichstag? It was clear that the subhuman Balkans could not lead themselves. There was something manipulating them. Hungary was the perfect suspect. After all, the recent invasion of Russia proved Corona should not have lost in a fair fight. Furthermore, hadn't the Reichstag deadlock prevented the commitment of German forces until it was too late? If Austro-Germany had provided full support, France would have been knocked out before any response could be mounted. Even now, they defended the insipid puppet government that was raking the German people over the fires and preventing any legitimate criticism or protest. Hatreds grew.

Hundreds of years ago, an evil queen had laid a foul enchantment on an innocent princess. A prince had rescued her. Then the queen fell from a cliff. That was her story. There was a new story. It was the story of a Boy and the Mirror. The evil queen lived. A civil war started. The Holy Roman Emperor died. A new Emperor rose. This new Emperor issued a proclamation. That proclamation was the Golden Bull of Maximilian, which defined the nature of the Holy Roman Empire until its eventual replacement by Austro-Germany and the imperial German Federation. The Emperor had a son. The boy was sent to his aunt to be raised. She was very pretty. They called her Snow White. In his idle time, the son explored his aunt's Bavarian castle. He found a dusty old mirror. He played games with it, asking questions about all sorts of trivia. His youth passed. He explored the castle less and less until he visited it no more, consumed by his work. This son married the heiress to Spain. They had children. He grew wearier. The marriage was unhappy. In a fit of rage, he ordered his son to be tutored in Bavaria with his now ancient aunt. His wife was very mad. She had the power, not him. He was always trying to assert his authority even though she was the queen. They compromised. Their son would spend his summers in Bavaria and the rest of the time in Belgium. The son who became the father died. It was typhus. The young boy also found the Magic Mirror. He would spend his time learning about strange and foreign lands, asking the Mirror all sorts of questions. Eventually, his childhood ended as well. He returned the Mirror to its dusty attic. The boy became a man. The man became the Emperor. Sometimes the Emperor had to fight. He did not like to fight. Fighting hurt people. He did not like that. He did not want to be mean to people. But the Turks were mean. The French were mean too. There was a monk. The monk did not like the Church. They disagreed. The monk made a paper. This paper had all of the bad things the Church did on it. There were debates. People got mad. The Emperor had to do something. He called the monk to a meeting. It was the Diet of Worms. But they weren't the squirmy, squishy worms. Worms was a city on the Rhine. There was a red monk. There was a blue monk. There was one monk. There were two monks. The monks fought.

The Emperor was sad. He had to make them stop. He had a great idea. He remembered the fun Mirror. He sent his soldiers out. They went to Bavaria. They brought back the Mirror.

The Emperor raised himself up high and asked the Mirror his question in the most imperious tone he could muster. It was time to settle the Protestant debate.

The mirror shattered. Shards flew through the air.

Charles V wept bitterly, for twice had his childhood been stolen from him. First, when he had to assume power and become a man. Then again now, as the world shattered like the mirror, the Bible no longer being certain as brother turned against brother. His beloved Magic Mirror was gone. Though his best soldiers would scour Europe, they would never find all of the shards. Charles V retired to a monastery and governed no more. He hung clocks on every wall but did not have a single mirror. So ended the tale of the Boy and the Mirror.

The grinning boar's head stared into his heart. Charles shivered. He had never liked his uncle's grotesque collection. The palace air was quite cold. He supposed it was to be expected now that the servants were gone. He noted the insignia above the fireplace. By right, everything was his.

But he had never been crowned. He would never have a regnal number, would never rule the empire.

The sound of footsteps came from behind him. Charles turned around. It was Horthy.

"Young prince, what are you doing here?" asked Horthy.

"R-r-reclaiming my birthright!" replied Charles.

"By looking at baubles?"

"M-maybe?"

"You're getting nothing done here."

"At least I'm trying."

"Trying to do what, exactly?"

"Trying to put right what was wronged! To fix injustice! To regain what is mine!"

"I see. And how are you going to do that?"

"I'm going to go out in the streets. The people shall rally to me."

"Yes, all the crowds will gather round their rightful Emperor and cheer for his return. They will storm the Diet and order you be made king. Is that your plan?"

"Yes?"

"I think you should be in school. A degree is a good thing to have."

"Hmpf! I just graduated. Enough books, time for action."

Horthy took a seat. He continued, blank-faced, to look at young Charles.

"Tell me more," said Horthy.

"Austro-Germany was a great country. A noble country! It was democratic, fair, just, everything the Allies claimed it wasn't. Even the discrimination... I've seen their countries. Look at how the Americans treat their negroes and the British their Irish. Perhaps they did not have full votes, but they still had partial votes, and a common Croat or Slovene never had to fear roving lynch gangs. And many of them still disenfranchise their women. Are these the people speaking to us about rights and human dignity? Even then, Ferdinand would have changed things if he had the chance. We were on the road to a

bright future and they tore it all down, and for what? Power? Money? Hatred? It sickens me. Emperor Ferdinand had a righteous dream and it was ruined."

"I see. Tell me about Ferdinand."

"Well, he was a wise man. He was always thinking about reform and how to improve the country. He was very loving towards his family."

"He also had a hobby of hunting."

"Yes."

"Did you know he killed over three hundred thousand personally? Some of them were sacred. Those incidents prompted great uproar."

"I didn't know that."

"He was often quite violent and moody with his advisors. He despised Hungarians. It made it very difficult for him to work with the Reichstag."

"Are you saying he was a bad man?"

"No. He loved his family very much. He did uphold the principles of the constitution as best he could and campaigned earnestly and sincerely for reform. Even if he did not personally like Hungarians, his Federal statehood plan was still fair enough. He was not a bad man. He was a man."

"Then what does it take to be a good man?"

Horthy peered deep into Charles' eyes, face still blank. It was an unusual manner for the man.

"The path of a good man is very hard when power is involved. At every turn, you will make strong enemies. They will try to stymie your every effort. To defeat them, you will have to make your own allies. But you will find that your allies are rarely as noble as you. At each

juncture, you will be tempted to join forces with the lesser evil to vanquish the greater one. Oftentimes, you must do it, because letting evil triumph is a great ill indeed. Better to let the lesser evil taste a little success than to do nothing. To do nothing is to simply allow the triumph of wicked men. But, in allying with evil, you cannot completely stop the stain from spreading to you. Bit by bit, it will taint you. In the end, these little evils will accumulate and you will find yourself no longer wholly good. It is a very easy thing to fall. It is a very hard thing to stay good. You will regret every compromise you make with the lesser evil. But hell let loose on earth cannot be subdued with the beating of angels' wings."

"Are you saying it's impossible to be a good man?"

"No, but it is very difficult. The path of the good man is friendless. A hero will find the world too impure to be heroic. It will turn against him. To be a hero, you must be willing to face down the entire world alone, and you must triumph over it."

"Then I shall! I will walk into the streets and dare the world to strike me down. I'll fight the world!"

"Is that what you think I'm telling you? You have to triumph over the world, you can't just stand against it. Do you remember your grand uncle?"

"Yes."

"What would he do now?"

Charles pondered the question.

"He always valued gentlemanly behavior."

"Would a gentleman stalk the streets like some common rabble rouser?"

"I suppose he wouldn't. Then what can I do? What next?"

"That's up to you."

Charles looked at Horthy.

"Do you think I'll ever see Hungary again?"

"If you are good and true, then one day, you will return. The crowds will gather in the street to see their rightful Emperor. They will storm the Diet and demand you be made king. They will crown you in Matthias Church and you will reign wisely."

"But you said it was hard to be a good man."

"Yes. But it is not impossible."

"Can I be a good man?"

"What would your grand uncle say?"

"I don't know."

"He would say that he believes in you."

Horthy hugged Charles and Charles began to cry.

Charles left the palace. Horthy returned home. He had plenty of business to take care of. The Diet had given him special powers and ordered him to restore order in the country. All sorts of things had been put into disarray after the peace was settled. That night, Horthy would have a salad. Meat would be too distressing to a stomach still racked by butterflies. He thanked God for being merciful. Charles was still quite young and had been emotionally pliant. If Charles had been more stubborn or pressed the point further, he would have been stuck in a quagmire. He would have to advance a real argument and exposed legitimate reasons rather than playing on Charles's emotions, and things could have gotten quite unpleasant. All of Hungary's neighbors save Austria and Germany had sworn to redeclare war should a Hapsburg return to the throne. Yet Horthy was honorbound to protect the throne. He had sworn an oath to the

late Emperor Franz Joseph. He would later come under fire from much of the Diet for his handling of the affair, as many were still monarchist at heart, despite disagreeing with the methods and mannerisms of Emperor Ferdinand. But things soon calmed back down.

Charles eventually found a wife at one of many social events. He and Princess Zita were soon married. He attempted a few more times to rally support, but the conversation with Horthy had fixed itself in his young mind. As the years passed by, the hope of restoration grew dimmer and dimmer. He started a children's hospital and a greeting card company with a few friends he had made. In the middle of the Roaring Twenties, as memories and scars of the Great War grew fainter, he wrote another letter to Horthy. Horthy's response was that the situation remained unfavorable. It was not that his wishes were unjust. But the wills of those with power prevented restoration.

And so Charles eventually resigned himself to the quiet life of an ordinary citizen.

The paths of Charles and Horthy would cross again. Destiny had mandated it.

The story of Charles IV the Blessed, last King of Hungary, was not yet over.

A young man stewed in anger, having twice been rejected from art school. The mirror shard in his hand whispered to him. He listened.

Quorum had been achieved. The Parliament of War was now in session.

Author Notes:

Fact: The only white countries in the world are Argentina and The Gambia.

Fact: I agree with every viewpoint espoused in this fic. Even the ones that don't make sense or contradict others. It takes talent to doublethink this hard, but I'm a talented guy.

Fact: Facts are fun.

Questions

Elsa groaned. More paperwork. Did it ever stop?

"Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey."

She was being poked.

"Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey."

Elsa looked down.

"Hello Olaf," said Elsa. "Did you need anything?"

"Nope! I was just poking you to check if you could still talk. You never know when some evil fairy might lay down a curse."

"I see."

"Why do you look so sad?" asked Olaf.

"Well, my life is hard. I have to make a lot of difficult decisions and sometimes it hurts a lot of people."

"Why would you ever want to hurt anyone?"

"I have no choice. A country, even a small one like Arendelle, is too large to avoid hurting anyone. No matter what I do, someone will suffer. Power is responsibility. When people make you responsible for something, you get power over them-they need you to do something. But you're stuck with that responsibility. Does that make sense?"

"I guess. So what are you doing right now?"

"Economics."

"What's that?"

"I'm managing money."

"Why is that important?"

"Money isn't important, but the things money can get are. Money feeds the starving, cures the sick, and houses the homeless."

"Oh."

"Growing the national economy doesn't necessarily improve the lot of common folk, but it can."

"So you're helping people."

"Business is a tool. How it's used determines what it does."

Olaf looked thoughtful for a moment, then walked away. A deep mounting pressure built up inside Elsa, and she suddenly felt as if the course of history had been forever changed. Then she farted. It was just gas.

She was screaming. The air was forced out of her lungs. With a wet thud, she hit the ground. The heat and smoke pressed in all around her. With a grunt, she got back up, splotches of red all over her uniform. She wasn't screaming because they had hurt her. Most of the blood covering her came from them. She was screaming because her friends were screaming.

Anna lunged forward, slashing out the intestines of an assailant. She whipped back around, beheading another. Six shots from her revolver. Six down. But there were more of them. There were always more. She had to fight her way to her friends. The sky smelled like copper. It was raining lead. The earth was sweet. She grasped a neck and snapped it. She found a neck and slit it.

She broke into a calm part of the battle. The enemy circled around a body. It was her sister's. Elsa was face down in the mud. Anna

rushed over. She flipped Elsa's body over.

There was no face. Anna screamed. She was doing that quite a lot lately.

She woke up. She embraced Kristoff.

"Kristoff, I had an awful nightmare," said Anna.

Kristoff didn't respond. Anna shook him. Kristoff continued to lay there with a carrot for a head. Anna rubbed his orange face and groaned. Kristoff was always such a heavy sleeper. The melty clock on her bedstand began to scream. Ugh. She would really have to get a new alarm some day. She ate the quadrangle tangerine and the yellow squig clocked in at the pause, stopping scream time alarm waking. Time to greet the day. The little mangos chirped happily outside, greeting the wolf's head rising through the green sky. She would really have to mow the anchovies today. She got dressed and ate the chocolate door. Then she got a new chocolate door from the door closet and installed it in the frame. She whistled. It was a fine looking door.

She strolled into the kitchen. Mr. Krumkake was waiting for her there.

"Banzai geronimo! I'm a whale. Make sure to catch the subway to Finland," said Mr. Krumkake.

"I'll have the bacon and some krumkake," said Anna.

"Then we'll just spin up the turbine and cruise our way to inverted dolphin," said Mr. Krumkake. That was a good plan.

Her silverware was all clean and properly sorted. How peculiar. Anna furrowed her brow. Had someone broken in and sorted all of her dishes? She shrugged and took a plate. Time for breakfast!

When she turned around, Elsa was there. Her body was blurred and foggy. She was devoid of color. Her face was non-distinct, a mottling

of grays and blacks.

"Hi Elsa," said Anna.

"Hi Anna," said Elsa.

"Sorry that you're dead," said Anna.

"I sure am dead," said Elsa.

Robo-Sven beeped. Several rockets flew out of his robo-mouth.

"I'm really sorry that I've never done anything but fail you and let you down. I'm really sorry that I only fuck up and make mistakes and fail over and over and over again. All I ever wanted was to make you happy but I could never find the way. I don't know why I'm so worthless. I would trade the world to have you back."

"It's okay, Anna. You're just stupid. There's nothing to be done about it. You were outwitted by a pig, after all. Can't judge you too harshly," said Elsa.

"That's no excuse. I could've tried harder, been different. I couldn't because I was weak. I was weak and I didn't know how. What kind of a sister am I?"

Elsa only shrugged.

"Who knows?"

"I want to change."

"You can't change when you're dreaming."

"That would explain the neat plates," murmured Anna.

Anna woke up. The bed was cold and she was alone.

She dressed herself. Her outfit was a mixture of traditional Sami clothing and a Napoleonic dress uniform-she had sewn it herself. Life was different up north. It demanded self-sufficiency. They had moved after Elsa's death, though she had often gone abroad. The state needed the palace for government functions, and Kristoff had never liked the hustle and bustle of the polluted capital anyways. There was nothing up here but your hunting rifle and wits. It was more honest.

At any rate, the palace had held too many old memories.

Anna put on her glasses and the world came into focus. She had managed with just one eye for a long time. But now even her vision was leaving her. She got up, steadying herself with her wendigo bone cane. It was a good trophy but an even more useful tool. She fumbled around until she found it.

A photograph of Elsa. Her talisman. She focused on it intently. She needed to memorize every feature so that she wouldn't forget. It was the ritual that defined her morning. She studied each bit of the black and white picture until it was firmly committed to her mind. It was the one thing indispensable to her.

Anna went to the kitchen. She retrieved a pitcher of milk from the icebox and poured it into her yeti skull cup. She fried up some venison. She ate quietly.

She went to the den. Sven was already waiting there, reading yet another book.

"Good morning Sven," said Anna. "Reading another book? Sometimes I wish I could do that as well as you."

"Nothing stops you from trying," said Sven.

"It's just... so much to remember. There's all these words and all this information and I feel really dumb all the time. How did you start?"

"As long as I could remember, I've tried to guide Kristoff and act as his conscience. When I first saw the castle library, I was confused. You see, I, like most reindeer, was not literate. I tried eating one of the books. Your sister, blessed be her name, stopped me. She taught me to read. It opened a whole new world for me. So many questions have been pondered over the eons. If I have an eternity to spend, why not spend it learning? Kristoff was a good man, he just needed a shove in the right direction most of the time. I think that's true of almost everyone. One day, I hope to be the shove the world needs. For now, I read."

"I wish I could understand things like you do."

"You can. You're smarter than you give yourself credit for."

Anna frowned.

"Maybe."

Anna rubbed the moon rocks on the mantle for good luck. She slung her Winchester Model 1876 rifle over her back, picked up an axe, and headed out the door. The snow crunched under her feet as she plodded her way forward. Songbirds chirped and chattered, guiding Anna through the woods. After a few minutes, she reached the shed. There was work to be done. First she chopped firewood. It paid to prepare for the bad times during the good. She was getting sicker, and soon enough there might be a time when she could no longer. Already, her bones were aching as if searing hot needles were being plunged into the marrow. She clutched at the stump of her arm. Weakness.

She had more than enough food for the coming winter, though it always paid to be sure. Most of it was stored in a tree house. One time, she found a bear up there. Through observation, it had figured out how to use the ladder and climbed up to eat the food. For several tense moments, she and the bear had stared each other down. Then the bear grunted and scampered away.

A few days later, it came back. Again, she and the bear stared each other down. Anna had puffed herself up and growled at the bear. The bear hid its face with its hands and whimpered. Having asserted her dominance, Anna chose an interesting next move. She took a deep breath and began to sing Kalinka. The bear stood up and began to clap its hands. Soon enough, it was dancing. Anna danced too. She had befriended the bear.

Anna whistled into the woods and the bear came running.

"Hey there Bruno. How are you doing? Good? Good," said Anna. "We're not going into town today."

To be quite honest, town didn't hold much for her. She was self-sufficient. Besides... those strange men with their black shirts and goose stepping disturbed her. She was certain they were rebels of some sort. But they weren't the rebels of her day. And she no longer had the strength to stop them.

The bear grunted in agreement. Anna climbed onto his back. They went deeper into the woods. She smelled the woods all around it. It was earthy and untainted by the smoke and furor of civilization. She heard everything. The rats scurried about. Birds flew silhouetted against the clear gray sky. The air was clean and crisp. Thin spider-fingers of snow caressed the trunks of balding trees. A few tracks sat there, daring response, their forms already starting to fade under fresh powder. Anna followed. Wind stole through the branches of the trees.

And she was immersed in it, this deafening sound of silence that permeates the places untouched by man. It is a loud silence, a silence that demands the attention of every sense and even senses beyond the possession of man. Every detail of the quiet must be observed, lest the unwary be caught by the wise. She was consumed by it and she consumed it. The tracks continued. She climbed a hillock and spotted her goal. There was a pond there. Gentle steam floated up from its surface, the water still liquid despite

the ice and snow all around it. Now she would wait. In the distance, a rabbit screamed its high-pitched, childlike death rattle.

The little ripples on the surface of the pond were her first clue. Something was near. She lay in wait. Patience was the key. Lack of patience would scare off her prey. She had to hide and let it come to her. First came a mother deer and its family. Anna waited. There were too many, and killing the adult would lead to the needless deaths of the others. She waited. The family of deer passed. After several minutes, another deer stopped at the watering hole. She exhaled and held.

And in that moment, she was one with nature and the universe. The gun was an extension of her self, a piece of her will projected onto the world. The deer was not just a deer, but Deer, a primal manifestation of the concept of prey. She was the Apex Predator, stepping into a role prepared long ago, a role fulfilled by man for aeons. In that moment was fulfillment, the fulfillment of Man-as-Animal and not just Man-as-Man, the identity of steel and iron built up over ages of civilization temporarily superceded by a far older soul made of clay and wood, an orgasmic atavism crying out from primeval times. The shot rang out through the woods and the deer was still. Anna walked slowly over. The deer was gasping, choking on its own blood. Anna took out her dragon's tooth knife and put it out of its misery.

"Shhh, shhh. It's all over now. I thank our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for delivering this bounty onto us. And I thank all the spirits of the woods and the creatures of the earth," said Anna.

The deer had died so that she may live. One day, she knew, she would die so that others may live. Bruno came over and tore off a few chunks of flesh, then she loaded the carcass onto the bear. They returned home.

Olaf was waiting for them, sitting atop a strange mechanical contraption.

"Anna!" shouted Olaf.

"Olaf!"

"Anna!"

"Olaf!"

"Anna."

"Olaf?"

"Why are we saying each other's names?"

Anna rubbed her chin.

"Hmmm. I don't know!" said Anna.

"How have you been?"

"Well, I just killed a deer. What's that thingamajigger you're sitting on?"

"It's an automobile!"

"Is it magic? Why is it called an automobile?"

"Because it auto mobiles."

Anna gasped audibly.

"I bet you get in all sorts of adventures with your automobile."

"Oh, for sure. I went to this funny place called Wall Street and there weren't any walls. But there was a lot of money! Now I'm super duper rich. It's almost like I'm cheating at life."

Olaf whipped out a bunch of tiny badges.

"Which of these do you think looks nicest? The happy chameleon? The spooky scary skull? What about this badger?" asked Olaf.

"What are these for?"

"Oh, I'm just founding a bunch of secret societies. It's fun!"

"That does sound fun. I wish I could go with you."

"Well, why not?"

"I'm old now. My body is weak."

"I'm sorry."

"And besides, I would just mess it up anyways."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well... because I mess everything up, I guess. Elsa could've been happy but I was such a screwup that she wasn't."

"How can you say that? She never thought you were a screwup."

"But I never did anything right. All I did was create problems for her."

"I think I have something to show you. Follow me."

Olaf led Anna to her study. He pointed to a row of books.

"Those are just the books Elsa wrote. I never could read any of them, the words were always too hard."

"Well, why I don't take a look in some of them for you? I'll just grab this one and... oh, Mrs. Potsdam, what are you doing? Ooooh. Ohhhhh. Oh. That's naughty! We'll just put that one back where it belongs," said Olaf. He blushed.

He grabbed another book. The spine was labeled "On Humanity". He began to read from it.

"Ever since man has thought, he has asked questions. What is the meaning of life? How do we determine truth? Does truth even exist? What is justice? What is the nature of the universe? Time after time, mankind offers up an answer, and it suffices for a time, but time after time, each of these answers proves to be inadequate. The possibility that there are no answers lingers over humanity. It is one of the oldest answers in existence, the rejection of answers and intrinsic meaning. Perhaps we are merely apes and our lives have no purpose. But even if this is true, there are people whose optimism and hope burn so fervently that one is forced into belief. Even if there is no meaning in life, these people are so good and pure that one finds meaning within them. In short, they provide reason enough to live.

This, more than anything, gives me hope for the future. I do not know the ideologies of the future and the creeds for which blood will be spilled. I do not know the weapons that will be wielded in those distant wars. I do not know what strange and powerful science will come forth. But I do know that there will be people like her. And because of that, everything will turn out alright in the end."

Olaf looked up.

"That's you, Anna. She was talking about you," said Olaf.

"I don't know how I can possibly thank you," said Anna.

Anna paused. She ran to the closet and began to root through it. Was that it? No, that was just a shrunken head. And that was a top hat. And that... nope. What about that? That was just a squirrel. Wait, another squirrel? Oh, that one was stuffed. What kind of a silly person would keep **two** squirrels in their closet? Ah, there it was.

Anna pulled out a crate and blew the dust off. With a single wrenching motion, she tore the lid off.

"For services rendered to West Point, a crate of gold bullion. Don't ask where it came from. Sincerely, your friend, Ulysses."

She had kept it for a rainy day, but she had never gotten around to spending it.

"I think you can use this better than I can," said Anna.

"Thanks," said Olaf. "Whooooa, shiny."

"And Sven...? I think you should go with Olaf," said Anna.

"But then you'll be all alone," replied Sven.

"You can do more good with him, and I think he needs you more," said Anna. "Besides, I get the feeling I was never really alone."

"Well, what do you say ol' buddy? Wanna go on an adventure with me? We could short stocks in London! Fight pirates by Malaysia! Unveil Ponzi schemes! Find ancient ruins! Increase market share! Shave! Wear busy business suits of busy business like we're the swaggiest swell fellas this side of Paris! And we could do each others nails and eat ice cream and start international conspiracies and bake cupcakes and hire mercenaries and drive cars and go fishing and sip strawberry daiquiries and manipulate geopolitics and sit on the beach and pay taxes! Pay taxes! We'd be... taxpayers. Fulfilling our civic duty. Everyone would look at us and go, 'Wow. Those guys pay taxes. They're such upstanding citizens.' It would be great," said Olaf.

"That sounds marvelous, Olaf. I do think I would like that. Goodbye Anna. I hope we'll see each other again," said Sven.

Anna nodded.

"Get in pal 'o mine," said Olaf. "I'm driving."

Anna watched the car fade into the distance. She looked upwards towards the sky. A single snowflake kissed her cheek. She smiled.

"Boss, you never talk about your brother."

And he was right. But what was there to talk about?

"He's just an idiot with his head in the clouds and too much hope for his own good. Gonna get himself killed one day," growled Marshmallow.

"Still, he's family, ain't he? Blood's thicker and liquor's quicker and all that jazz," said the mobster.

"A fool's still a fool no matter how you slice it. He's caught up in those complicated rescues of his, as if he can save humanity from itself. Me, I'm a simple snowman. War is business and business is war. All life is competition. You either get or get got yourself. I saw fuckers in the Napoleonic Wars, I saw fuckers in Crimea, I saw fuckers in the Red Conquest, and lemme tell you, they were always the same fuckers. People don't change. That's why they're so easy to fleece. Walk with me, Johann. I'd like to inspect my money."

Michael "Mick" Smith took a look at the casino in the distance. Time to make a fortune. He grinned. Pierre was being paranoid. How would they ever tell anyways? It would be the easiest money he'd ever make.

He walked into the casino and took in the crisp, mechanical air. A few strange rock creatures waved at Mick. Mick waved back. Then he noticed the sign above them and grimaced, awkwardly shuffling behind a slot machine to break eye contact.

"Do not leave children near trolls unsupervised."

Ominous. Ah well. Time for some advantage play! Time for money!

It was clear that nothing could go wrong. He found a table, flashed the dealer a winning grin, and began to play.

"Boss? Oi, boss. Boss, there's someone winning way too much money on the floor."

"Is there now? Good. I haven't had fun in a while," said Marshmallow. "I enjoy fun."

"Is that right? I enjoy fun too, boss. I think most people like fun."

They descended the stairs from Marshmallow's office and entered the casino floor. They spotted the cheat. Michael gasped. There was a snow golem with a parasol and Victorian gown coming right for him. Marshmallow walked over and simply picked up the man. He yelped, squirming and twisting his body to get away. The snow golem simply tugged him along.

"Hey buddy," said Marshmallow. "What do you think you're doing there?"

"Let me go! I know my rights," complained Michael.

"Do you now? This here isn't part of Norway. Did you know that? It's not part of the HOSAR either. Those civil codes just plain don't apply. As far as you're concerned, this is the jungle, and I'm King fucking Kong."

"I've done nothing wrong."

"I'll be the judge of that. You're coming with me."

Marshmallow pushed his way to a service door and went through. They descended deep into the guts of the casino, the winding service tunnels taking them deeper and deeper into the earth. It was a kind of place to be buried in.

He was unceremoniously thrown into a bare wooden chair in a bare loveless gray cement room. A single broken lightbulb dangled above his head. Photo-luminescent mold provided the only light.

"Now friend, why do we have a problem?" asked Marshmallow.

"You have to let me go," said Michael.

"In due time. Why don't you make yourself comfortable first?"

"Are you insane? You can't just snatch up people like this."

"That doesn't sound very comfy to me. How about I help you along with a story?"

"..."

"There once were some Swedes. These Swedes, well, they were rude as rude could be. They tried to gas me. But, heh, funny thing. I don't need to breathe. I watched as the winds turned. The clouds blew back on them, and I walked over to their trench. Their commander was choking on it. I saw his face plumpen and purple, and it was just the swellest, most terrific humdinger of a thing you ever saw. Boy howdy, it was a real knee-slapper. He started spasming, you know. Clawing his own eyes out as he screamed a soundless scream. He twitched a whole bunch. Reached his hand out to me, Lord knows why. And I watched. Eventually, he stopped moving. Doesn't that just warm your heart?"

"..."

"Well, alrighty then. I've got another story for you then. Once, there were these families, see. Five of 'em. They ran the Big Apple. They get it in their heads to expand. One thing leads to another. Voices were raised, I'm sorry to say. Mostly mine. Anyways, I decide to leave, and what do you know? My car was bombed. I lived. I always do. My good Fed friends decided to order a lot of pizza after that. Understand?"

"No."

"Really? You don't understand why I'm telling you these stories. It should be obvious."

"No?"

"Because they tried to fuck me, friend. And now I'm standing here, wondering why a fine gentlemen like you also wants to fuck me. Why do you want to bust my balls?"

"I don't want to bust your balls."

"Oh, I understand now! I know why you want to fuck me. It's because I'm a pretty princess with a tiara and a lovely dress. Everyone wants to fuck a princess."

"No!"

"No? Do I look fat in this outfit?"

"No!"

"No? Then why don't you want to fuck me? I'm offended. Do you think I'm ugly?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what do you mean? You're liable to break a poor girl's heart over here."

"I-I-I don't know."

"Would you like to take a look at my parasol? I think you would."

Marshmallow twirled his parasol in the air then pointed it at Michael. A chill ran down his spine. He was looking down the barrel of some sort of weapon.

"Like it? Inside is a Carl Gustav. It can splatter vehicles. I wonder what it could do to a person?"

"Please don't kill me."

"Alright. Alright, that's fair."

Marshmallow gave Michael a quizzical look. Then ice spikes sprouted from his body.

"GET OUT!" shouted Marshmallow. His shout froze over Michael's face and iced over his clothes. Michael ran.

"So how'd the gambling go?" asked Pierre.

"I don't want to talk about it," replied Michael.

"So where to next?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Why don't we visit Santa?"

"Santa's not real."

"Pfff. That's just American propaganda."

"If Santa is real, where does he live?"

"Korvatunturi, of course!"

"Bullshit."

"Nope. He was once a mortal like you and I. His family was killed by trolls and he swore to avenge them by whittling toys for his village. Years passed, and his quest for toy-related vengeance became an obsession! He grew into an old man, still making toys all the while. One day, a Scottish man came knocking. It was Sean Connery. They had a whittling contest, neither able to gain ground until Santa decapitated Sean Connery and absorbed his essence. There can be only one!"

"I think that's the plot of Highlander."

"Nah, that's Santa's origin story. You shouldn't doubt Santa, he'll send you coal. Santa's real chill."

"Is he now?"

"Yeah, man. He fought in the Great Patriotic War, racking up twelve Panzer kills, but when he criticized Stalin, he was sent to the gulag. He spent the next twenty years there, and the CIA considered assassinating him. In the end, they chose to enact their greatest deception ever: convincing the West Santa had never existed. Of course, the Iron Curtain has fallen now, and everyone can visit Santa. He doesn't really make his own toys anymore. Too many kids. Instead, he uses Coca-Cola royalty money to buy toys from China."

"I see?"

Then they went to visit Santa and it was great fun for everyone. Everyone loves Santa.

Author Notes:

Keeping track of timelines is hard and there are so many dates and I made half of them up and shit arghhh

What I mean to say is, I'm sorry. I made a grievous error in changing the date of WWI, inadvertently making the backstory timeline of Princess and the Frog impossible to resolve without time shenanigans. It is a mistake and I have no excuse. I apologize for this severe failing in accuracy and date-checking and I will endeavor to do better in the future.

Quest for the New World

" Therefore, it seems self-evident that human history is a history of loves. Mankind has always progressed from the lesser love to the greater. First, people only cared for their immediate family. But then, the people learned to love other families. Tribes were born. From there, cities. People cared for others even if they were not kin of any sort. Now, people are willing to fight and die for others they have never known or even met, simply because they share the same flag. They will sacrifice anything out of pure love for their nation. And so, their loves have progressed a great deal from the simple days of tribes and families. It only seems logical that the next step is to extend that love towards the entire European race, and then from there, all mankind. If the Prince is ruthless or cruel, it is only out of a mother's love, a kind desire to nurture and enlarge this love towards its end goal. And should this trend of love be reversed, woe be unto the world." - Rapunzel, Girl in the Tower: A Memoir, Edited, with love, by Bismarck

"We're losing control."

The words everyone knew but were afraid to say.

"What are we going to do?"

"They're not responding well to force."

"They don't know what's good for them."

"The mob is run by emotions. They can't parse anything as complicated as cost-benefit. To them, a dead kid is more than enough reason to start a war."

"Idiots."

"We have to stop it."

"How?"

"Escalate. Send in more troops."

"They'll just get angrier. First others kill their children, now their own government wars against them to prevent the enacting of justice?"

"That's not how it works."

"I know, but that's how they'll see it."

"I'll intervene personally."

"You can't do this Your Majesty. Let us handle this."

"They won't lift a hand against their Queen."

"It only takes one deranged radical to bring you down. Remember Caesar, thou art mortal."

"What choice do we have?"

"If we risk you, we risk everything. You are Corona."

"And if I do nothing, we're sure to shed blood for nothing. There's a chance to avoid that. I have to take it."

The ministers finished their meeting. Rapunzel delivered a speech to the rebellious crowds. They dispersed. The tide of the people pulled back.

But a chill went down her spine. How much longer could they squeeze blood from a stone?

Democracy was coming.

"I love you, but you can't do this."

He twiddled his mustache while running his other hand through his graying hair. The fire behind crackled briskly, sending sparks scattering through the air like Mycenaean stars. She took a deep drag from her tobacco pipe.

"You're my little princess, and anything you want that is within my power to provide, you may have. But you have responsibilities, cupcake. It's not just about you and me, it's about our whole family. It's about our dynasty. We've lived here since the time of Piast. If it was just a responsibility to me, I would let you do anything you want. But you have a responsibility to every one of your ancestors, everyone in our line," said Baron Bischofstein.

"I know."

"The blood of the House of Bisztynek runs through your veins. It's a privilege but also a burden."

"But father, I love her."

"And you can love her. But you must find a good husband as well. You must carry on our family line. If you wish to have a dalliance on the side, feel free. But you must never forget your duty."

Tatiana bit her lip.

"I know it's hard. But you have to try," said her father.

"I miss Mother," said Tatiana.

"I do too. She would be proud though, seeing you blossom from a little girl into a mature young woman."

"Will you be gone long?"

"Of course not."

"Take care of yourself."

"It's just rabble. They'll wet themselves with blood as soon as they see Her Majesty's cavalry coming. Glory to Corona."

"Glory to Corona."

Her father left the building. The hoof beats faded slowly into silence. Alone.

Perfect. She started running towards the barn.

"Where's my little wildberry?" asked Tatiana.

"Not here!"

"Oh, of course not. The baker's daughter wouldn't be so naughty as to abandon her father and his work. If she did, she would have to be... punished," said Tatiana.

"With whips and chains?" asked Anielka.

"And oils and shackles and other such things. And, of course, a thorough and intimate strip search. Who knows? Maybe she's smuggling weapons or working with rebels."

"My, my, how dreadful. God forbid anyone speak out against the tyranny of the regime."

"That sounds like rebel talk, mysterious voice."

Tatiana looked inquisitorially at one of the nearby bushes. She lunged forward and brushed the shrubbery aside. She grabbed Anielka's cheeks and pinched hard.

"Aha! Found you, dirty little rebel!" shouted Tatiana.

"Egads! Whatever shall I do now?" asked Anielka with mock distress.

"Nothing," said Tatiana as she came up from behind and began to caress to Anielka's breasts. "There is nothing you can do now!"

Bwahahahahaha!"

Anielka let out a soft moan.

"We will throw you into the Queen's dungeons and smear your body with honey like so..." said Tatiana, as she massaged Anielka's body.

"Oh, that doesn't sound so bad," replied Anielka.

"Trust me, it is. Insects and vermin will swarm over your body, tearing at your flesh, eating you alive," said Tatiana, pecking and licking Anielka's neck.

"How dreadful!" said Anielka. "But I mustn't lose my resolve. Down with the Queen and her wicked regime!"

"I will look forward to breaking you, my filthy little Jacobin," said Tatiana. "Remember the name of Tatiana von Bischofstein, for I will be the last woman you ever meet!"

Anielka gasped and pretended to faint. Tatiana grinned and licked her lips. She seized Anielka's bodice and ripped it open, then migrated one of her hands downwards, towards Anielka's pussy. Anielka began to shake as chills and hot flashes ran up her spine. Tatiana grabbed her by the waist and threw her into a pile of hay. She brought her hands up to loosen her collar.

"And now-"

Tatiana was interrupted by a poke from behind.

"And no-"

Again, another poke. Tatiana frowned. And now the sexecution. Three. Two. One.

"And-"

Once again, the poke disturbed her lusty haze. Tatiana turned around. It was short balding man giving her a cold stare. He was poking her with the shovel in his hand.

"Excuse me for bothering the lady of the house, but if I may be pardoned, I would like to enter and go about my business," said the man.

"Oh. Ummm. Yes, of course," said Tatiana.

As he passed, she noted an expression of pure contempt forming.

"Fucking nobles, can't see a glorious peasant coming through. Wankers think everyone can slack just as much as them. Don't realize SOME of us have to work for a living. Good season for crops, you know. Bet that dumb bitch doesn't know that. No callouses on **her** hands. Gonna grow the shit out of some crops! Gonna shovel the shit out of this shit! Goddamn aristocratic bums," grumbled the man.

He began to shovel under the hay, revealing the hay was merely covering a massive pile of manure. Tatiana groaned, and finally noticed that Anielka was quite literally covered in feces, with bits of straw and dung stuck to her red hair.

"I... errr... well. I suppose you should clean up," said Tatiana.

Tatiana exhaled and the wisps of smoke floated lazily into the air.

"Still don't know what to do, eh?" asked Karl. He took another sip of ale. "God, this stuff tastes like piss. Can't wait for the embargo on Bavarian goods to end."

"Fine brew of the motherland not to your liking?" asked Tatiana.

"Let me put it this way: if you told me it was Her Majesty's own urine, I'd believe you."

"So it tastes like sunshine and lollipops then?"

"And rainbows and smiles and the semen of a Polack hoodlum."

"Wonderful."

"You still don't know what to do, do you?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Just marry some chump, it'll be fine. You can keep banging your busty barmaid."

"Baker."

"Banker, barrister, babbitter, blacksmith, bander, bookie, bursar, it's all the same to me."

"I can't just do that to someone. What if he falls in love with me?"

"And then he professes his undying loyalty to Tatiana's tatas? Well, then you have to marry someone who ALSO wants to keep a lover. Then ipso-facto, bango-wango, everything is solved."

"I'll have to conceive heirs."

"Boo-hoo, I'm Tatiana and my life is so hard. I'm just getting TOO MUCH SEX. You don't see me complaining about my problems, do you?"

"You complain every day."

"I have a right to complain! Poor old Karl von Bischofstein, cadet. Landless Karl. Oh, a regular job would be too lowly for Karl's refined blood! It's the army for Karl, of course. And then I'll get shot and die, and you know what they'll put on my tombstone? Here lies Karl von Bischofstein. He never got laid. Just kill me now."

"Later."

"You're a terrible friend and an even worse cousin."

"Blood's thicker than water, isn't it?"

"And liquor is quicker and candy is dandy and hookah's a lookah. Roses are red, violets are blue, so are my balls, what's it to you?"

"You should have been a poet."

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

Knocking came from the door.

"I'll get it," said Tatiana.

She walked to the door. She opened it.

"Good evening, Corporal Schultz," said Tatiana.

He nodded.

"Your father was killed in action."

Always remember the family motto. Always.

Ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die.

Father in the corner, watching disapprovingly.

"Don't look at me like that, dad. You're dead and a hallucination."

Splayed over the bed. Can't get up. The moon peeking through scandalous curtains. A voyeur.

The ticking of the golden pocket watch. Her father's face glinting in its reflection. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. Hooting of an owl.

Fuck owls. Saw one disembowel a mouse once. No mercy in those hateful bird eyes. Owls are scum.

But it was forbidden love. She had held her arms by her sides, standing at attention. She whispered the words again. But it was forbidden love. Father looking at her. It was okay. He had been tempted by the forbidden fruit as well. Who was he to judge? There were far worse things than deviant dalliances. Deep, dark things in the depths of the human souls. Jacobin souls with Jacobin secrets. And they had hugged. And he had cried for a wife sacrificed. So who was he to judge? He had done far worse in his secret clubs.

And he confessed that, some nights, he still dreamed of tricolors and ballot boxes. The forbidden fruit had been too sweet.

But dreams are just dreams, and his was too much for a sinful word. But not hers.

She didn't remember what happened next. Waking up.

Falling asleep. She punched herself in the arm. The ticking of the pocket watch. The ticking began to slow. She dragged herself upwards. The hooting of an owl. She ignored the sound.

Wind the pocket watch. Wind it to full.

It had been Mother's, but the inscription was Father's. Made after the fact.

L.E.F. Lord Eckhard Firenze. Supposedly some distant relative. A lie. It was one last act for her. One last credo of devotion.

Liberty. Egalite. Fraternity.

The ticking of the watch's heartbeat lulled Tatiana to sleep.

I know you'll do the right thing. It sufficed as a will.

Tatiana picked up the newspaper. Riots continued in the capital. Of course, the paper was over a week old. There hadn't been any new ones. A media blackout had fallen upon the whole country. It gave her an immeasurable feeling of dread. Perhaps it was the natural way of things, not knowing of the wider world, but it was disquieting. The media was part of her life now, and news was a part of the daily routine.

They weren't reporting that the garrison in Corona had been quintupled. How dangerous was the capital right now? The words said rioting, but that was usually code for armed insurrection. A full scale uprising. She had heard rumors of activity in other countries. The second footman said that Frankfurt had fallen to local rebels. He also said the Austrian palace was under siege. Probably a load of shit. But maybe. There was always the possibility of a grain of truth.

Well, why didn't she go find out for herself? An outrageous question. It would be risky. Insane, even. Or perhaps everything would calm down by the time she even arrived.

"How are you holding up?" asked Karl.

"Alright," said Tatiana.

"That's a lie."

"I know. I was hoping you wouldn't call me on it."

"What kind of cousin would I be if I didn't?"

"A less annoying one."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I know you'll do the right thing.' That's the only advice he left behind."

"So do the right thing."

"I don't know what that is. Isn't that the problem?"

"Hell of a problem to have. Seems like everyone has it."

"Well, let's look at your options. You're going to have to marry someone. Take over the maintenance of the estate. Keep everyone calm and working."

"If you had land, you wouldn't have to join the army."

"Huh?"

What.

"I'm going to the capital," said Tatiana.

"I don't think I understand," said Karl.

Tatiana didn't understand either.

"Yeah, I'm heading to the capital."

"Need a vacation or something?"

"And I'm giving you the estate."

"Excuse me? What the hell are you going to do then?"

What the fuck are these words just spewing out like projectile vomit?

"I'm leaving," said Tatiana.

"And going where? What the hell are you thinking?" asked Karl.

"I'm thinking that I can save your sorry ass and find my own place."

"You mean..."

"Yeah."

"You won't ever be able to come back. It'll be a scandal if anyone finds out, and believe me, people will ask questions."

"I'm not coming back."

"... I'm a selfish bastard."

"Huh?"

"Kinda wish you would. At least promise me you'll write."

"I promise I'll write back."

Oh God, what is going on?

They hugged. Karl was crying.

"Take care of yourself, please. Don't die doing some stupid plan," said Karl.

"I'll be fine."

That was probably a lie. *Shit.*

"America?" squealed Anielka.

"... Yeah. America," said Tatiana.

"I don't believe it! Did you know they have the Fountain of Youth in America? Did you know that anyone can do anything and all the things and just do things because they're free? They can be whoever! Do whatever! No one will judge you because everyone is created and everyone has a right to pursue their own happiness. It's a paradise! The streets are paved with gold and the fields are endless and fertile," said Anielka.

Tatiana smiled.

"And we'll find a new life there," said Tatiana.

"It'll be a real life happy ending just like the fairy tales," said Anielka.

"We're going to be leaving from the capital."

"I've never been to the capital. Is it really as beautiful as they say?"

"I'd say so."

"The jewel of Prussia, capital of Corona, the Paris of the East. A city unlike any other along the whole Baltic. The City of Dreaming Lanterns."

"That's right, are you excited?"

"I'm so excited, I could-"

Anielka vomited all over Tatiana.

"Alright, that's a little too much excitement. Let's tone it down like... twenty notches," said Tatiana.

"I'm okay with that."

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"TRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNNNNN  
NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNSSSSSSSSS."
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Tatiana groaned. Every fifteen minutes, Anielka woke up, shouted trains, and then fell back asleep. It was like it was her first train ride.

Well, it was, but still. It wasn't **that** exciting. It was just a train. At least it would be over soon. They were pulling into Royal Cross Station. The gentle rolling hills of Pomerania slowly shrank away, revealing the glittering expanse of the Baltic. Tatiana whistled. Even she had to admit the ocean was quite an impressive sight.

It was just so... big. And large. And blue. And filled with fish. Like the smell of...

Ah, never mind.

Anielka woke up again.

"Where are we going first?" asked Anielka.

"I'm not sure. Where do you want to go?" asked Tatiana.

"I want... shoes! I want to see shoes."

"You want to see... shoes? Why?"

"Shoes are cool. Don't you like shoes? You gotta have shoes for all your feet."

"Okay, we can go see shoes."

"I want to see the shoe factory!"

"The shoe factory?"

"I bet it's full of pixies and fairies and shoe magic."

"I'm not so sure about that, but we can go see the shoe factory."

"Yay!"

The shoe factory didn't allow visitors. Predictable, but annoying. Luckily, she had a plan.

"What will we do now?" asked Anielka.

"Don't worry, I have certain skills that solve these problems. What kind of a lady would I be without a proper lady's education? I can sneak, jump, twist, fight, and ride." said Tatiana.

"Wow, it's like you're some sort of spy or master thief!"

"How do you think I stole your heart? Behold!"

With that, she leaped into the air, back-flipping and cartwheeling towards a pipe. She reached her hand out in mid-air, reaching out for the pipe. She missed, smashed into the brick wall, and crumpled. She groaned, then stood back up.

"Okay, I'll admit I'm a bit rusty. Gymnastics is hard," said Tatiana.

"Are you okay?" asked Anielka.

"Of course I am. I've got the constitution of a... a... strong thing."

"Maybe we should do something else."

"No, I can do this."

Tatiana sized up the pipe, then climbed up. This time, nothing fancy. Now she would lower a rope and...

Wait, she didn't have a rope. Why would she have a rope? Ugh. She climbed back down.

"I'll be right back, I'm going to go find a store," said Tatiana

She returned fifteen minutes later.

"I feel like this is getting suspicious. Keep a watch out for me, okay?" said Tatiana.

"Why would this be suspicious? We're just breaki-oooohhh. Got it!" said Anielka.

Tatiana climbed up again and then threw down the rope. She motioned for Anielka to climb up. They peered through the skylight.

Rows upon rows of tables filled the factory floor, strips of leather and cloth laid on top of them. The workers were not present at their stations.

A crowd of young women was gathered around a frumpy, middle-aged woman. She pushed her horn-rimmed glasses up and smirked.

"Ladies, ladies, do you know why this is happening? It's because you have a wonderful opportunity. Let this be a lesson to you all. If you don't appreciate the things you are given, they will be taken from you. But opportunity can lead you into some fantastic places, if you use it well. You have to work hard, though! Prosperity does not fall into your lap. It must be clawed out of the greedy jaws of poverty," said the matron.

"Please help me! I can't breathe, there's no air here! Let me out!" came a voice from a closet.

"You see, she did not want to work hard. Even worse, she tried to take shortcuts. We give her everything and she repays us by STEALING? By taking the raw materials GIVEN to you FREELY so that you may fashion your own salvation from poverty? There is no more loathsome a creature."

"I'm dying!" said the voice. It was followed by a series of muffled sobs and thumping against the door.

"And so, if we are t-" continued the matron.

"Excuse me?" asked a woman.

The matron's eyes shot daggers at her. She motioned to a guard.

"You don't interrupt me. Guards, beat her," said the matron. They complied. The sobbing and gasping grew quiet. After several moments, the matron nodded.

"Open the closet," said the matron. A girl fell out, pale in the face. She kicked her and noted the faint motion of her chest.

"Let this be a lesson to you all. Learn it well," said the matron.

Tatiana and Anielka backed away from the skylight.

"I don't think I want to wear shoes anymore. Or clothes," said Anielka.

"Ergh," said Tatiana.

"Do you think they allow nudity in the US?" asked Anielka.

"They certainly allow it in Germany."

"But we're not moving to Germany. Are there any fun places in Corona?"

"What do you think is fun?"

"I dunno. Something pretty?"

"How about the palace?"

"Okay!"

The path to the palace went through the square. Normally abuzz with citizens going about their business, it was now covered in tents. Half-dismantled barricades were strewn here and there, marking places where the disloyal had attempted to make a stand. A few, partially cleaned bloodstains were congealing into the tile flooring. Soldiers sat around makeshift campsites, cooking rations in entrenching pans. There had been fighting here, though it was now over.

They pushed through the troops towards the palace entrance. Guards formed a perimeter around the palace, guns at the ready. Horsemen stood with lances steady, prepared to spear anyone

making a wrong move. Tatiana took a deep breath, then walked imperiously up the steps.

"Halt! Who goes there?" asked a guard.

"Excuse me? I am Tatiana von Bischofstein," said Tatiana.

"Huh?"

"You, you dare to stop me?"

"I do-"

"You're interrupting very important business here! Do you even know who I am?"

"No, bu-"

"But nothing. You're wasting my time, and my time is very valuable. Will you let me pass, or will I have to inform your superiors of your incompetence?"

"I... uhhh..."

"Thank you."

Tatiana walked on by, Anielka in tow. After she passed the palace doors and ducked into a hallway, she let out a sigh of relief. Act like you belong, and no one will question it too much. It was almost too easy. Then again, it would have been quite painful if that hadn't worked. The things she did for love.

She walked through the hallways, looking for things of interest. Marble busts and paintings lined the wall. Some were Neoclassical, others Romantic, still others on the bleeding edge of modern art. Many criticisms could be levied against the Queen, but she was a patron of culture if nothing else. The hallway led into a large room. A stern man was tapping his foot impatiently. With a scowl, he checked his watch. A secretary was at a desk, writing.

"How much longer will I have to wait?" asked the man.

"The Queen will be with you shortly," said the secretary.

"Time is money and I dearly hope you aren't wasting mine," said the man.

"We wouldn't dream of it, sir. Your contributions to the realm are astonishing," said the secretary.

"Don't flatter me, I've no taste for it. Just get everything done. Inefficiency has no place in industry, and it most certainly should not have any place in government."

"Of course."

Tatiana smiled.

"You hear that?" whispered Tatiana.

"Huh?" whispered Anielka.

"That means the Queen is close."

"Ooooooh! Does that mean we can see her?"

"Yeah, we'll just have to go around. Follow me."

Tatiana and Anielka slipped into another hallway, charting a path around the room. For a royal palace, it was surprisingly straightforward in layout. It was almost too orderly. Every corridor seemed to be designed with a specific purpose in mind, with no wasteful additions or subtractions. In a way, it was less romantic for it. Then again, who decided that excess and gesturing was romantic anyways? Tatiana peeked around a corner and saw the Queen.

She was walking with the Chancellor.

"So what do you think we should do?" asked Rapunzel.

"If we accede to his demands, we'll be losing a valuable competitive edge over our rivals, especially Britain. Considering Britain's existing industrial lead, this may be a fatal mistake. Furthermore, it does not necessarily raise the quality of our product and may in fact do the opposite," said Bismarck.

"But there's the humanitarian aspects," said Rapunzel. "You can't put a value on human suffering."

"Not a monetary value, anyways, but like can be compared to like, and crippling our own industries to save a few a bit of suffering cannot be considered a moral trade," said Bismarck.

"And yet you want me to agree."

"Absolutely correct. Do you wish to play the Guessing Game with me, Your Majesty?"

"How can I say no? I love games, Bizzie! Hmmm... first of all, Herr Krupp is a very severe man. He wouldn't like us to fail him by denying his request. He already dislikes politics, so to even petition us represents a cost on his part, a cost that demands results."

"Good, yes."

"But if that were all, it wouldn't be good enough. So what else? Well, he has family ties in Vienna. If we say no, he might be upset enough to relocate his businesses, even if it came at great cost to him, a move that would cripple our industrial sector."

"Correct."

"But if either option cripples our industrial sector, it still doesn't give us a fun result, does it? Instead, we have to look at appearances. The reality of things is far less important than the appearance of things. Products built with labor regulation and no child workers may not actually be better, but we can market them better and use that as leverage to increase our share of world markets. This kind of ploy is

especially effective because feminist movements have just been suppressed across Europe. They'll still want to exercise power, and we can manipulate them into satisfying their 'maternal instincts' by buying more humane products. Control the mistress of the house and you control the wallet."

"Of course."

"And there's always another angle to work. By making reforms ahead of the curve, we appease liberal elements in Corona, causing them to agitate elsewhere and strengthening our own regime. The price of healthcare and pensions is cheaper than bullets, grapeshot, and compensation for widows."

"Naturally. I think that about covers it."

"What's my prize?"

"A meeting with Herr Krupp."

"My prize is work? Gosh, Bismarck, you sure know how to make games lame."

"And yet you are enjoying this."

"Doing a good job feels good."

Tatiana and Anielka walked in.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" asked Bismarck.

"I... uhhhh..." said Tatiana.

"Are you the Queen? I've never seen you in person before! I'm so excited to meet you!" said Anielka, hopping up and down a bit.

"That's wonderful, I'm excited to meet you too! I love meeting new people," said Rapunzel.

"Can I ask you a question?" said Tatiana.

"Sure," said Rapunzel.

"If a dream is hard and kinda crazy, should I still chase it?" asked Tatiana.

"Absolutely," said Rapunzel without a hint of hesitation.

"Even if-"

"A dream is always worth it. Chasing dreams is how you build a life worth living. If you don't, you'll always ask yourself what could have been. Follow your dreams."

"Thank you," said Tatiana.

"Could you sign my face?" asked Anielka.

Rapunzel signed Anielka's face. The Queen and the Chancellor walked off.

"So what of Podlasie?"

"We have to reduce their stronghold."

"What about..."

The sounds of conversation faded away. Tatiana and Anielka stood there, silent.

"Well... I guess that's that. Let's get going. America won't be around all day," said Tatiana. "Wait, that was stupid. The boat won't be around all day."

"So I don't see why I should give a shit."

"Don't you ever pay attention?" asked the first mate.

"No. I'm old and poor, why should I have to pay anything?" replied the captain.

The first mate shoved a piece of paper into the captain's face.

"Blah blah, orders of the Queen, Lithuanian considered a language of sedition, by the Grace of God, blah blah, hereby forbidden. What a load of bollocks. Who cares if I call it saltibarsciai instead of chlodnik?" asked the captain.

The first mate's eyes widened and he pointed towards the docks. A soldier was giving them both a curious look. They waved to the soldier, and he grinned and waved his entrenching pan back. Then he rattled his saber a bit and gestured that he was watching them.

Tatiana felt like she was being watched. Considering the soldiers everywhere, she probably was. An owl hooted in the distance. She heard the crunch of feet upon stone. There was definitely someone behind her. She reached for her pistol and prepared to turn around.

"Miss?"

Tatiana jumped a little. She immediately spun around to look.

"You dropped this watch. Looks expensive," said the man.

"Oh. Thanks," said Tatiana.

"You look spooked," said Anielka.

"It's nothing," said Tatiana.

They boarded the ship. Waves gently churned with sea foam as it pulled away from the harbor, chimneys smoking like a six-pack habit. Paddles dipped in and out of the brine. Their journey had begun.

The sea shook underneath the boat, swaying it back and forth. She still wasn't used to it, though she was no longer throwing up. She

could sail on the best ship money could buy, and in fact, was, but nothing could stop the motion of the ocean. There was something poetic in that, though she wasn't sure what.

Four days since they had seen land. Hull, England was now four days behind them. Ships of all kinds had stopped there, the last port of call before the sprint across the Atlantic. She could still smell the odor of sawdust and vomit hanging in the air. Bergen was six behind. They hadn't been able to go above decks when the ship docked in Arendelle-it was raining tar. Still, she had seen the laborers through the windows. Black streaks of oily rain cut through the coal dust dusting their chiseled bodies, sweat beading on their foreheads as they loaded the ice. Arendelle held a virtual monopoly on the stuff. One of her books had once estimated its global market share as well over ninety percent. Ice glittered with luxury. They had taken on five tons of ice there, three tons for every ten tons of food. Such was the price of not eating rotten meat and rancid butter. She held her gut for a moment, then steadied herself again.

Anielka walked in.

"Can you believe that I had to wait AN HOUR to use the toilet?" asked Anielka.

"Yes," said Tatiana.

"This is ridiculous. And when I finally got inside, there was a rat there! Oh, how dreadful. They only feed us salt pork and dried halibut and that loathsome hardtack. How can anyone live like this? Couldn't we have booked a nicer passage?"

"Excuse me? It would take your father more than a year to buy a ticket here. Now, consider that he has to pay for food and other expenses, and it would probably take him a decade or two to save up enough money. Two tickets? That's a lifetime of work. Show a little gratitude."

"... I'm sorry."

Tatiana sighed.

"No, I shouldn't have snapped at you," said Tatiana.

"The sun is going down," said Anielka.

"Yeah. Let's go to bed."

Having meager linens, they cuddled up for warmth. The sounds of grunting, thumping, and moaning heard through the thin walls lulled them both to sleep.

Boredom was the enemy and it was omnipresent. Luckily, at least tonight, there would be a reprieve. There was too much risk present in other... methods.

"Which dress looks better? The left one or the right?" asked Tatiana.

"Both look beautiful on you," said Anielka.

"Yeah, but one looks more beautiful, doesn't it?"

"Uhhh... huh?"

"Well, if I wore rags, would I be ugly?"

"No, you'd be beautiful."

"But it wouldn't look as nice as a dress, correct?"

"You're always pretty!"

"Forget it. I'll just choose whatever."

They followed the sound of music to the performance. Two women were up on the stage, one dressed as a legate, another a common legionary.

"And tonight our company is proud to present... a farce of Roman malcontents," said the Legionary.

"A play that has more guts than sense," said the Legate.

"A minor mix up makes for sport."

"But a major one demands retort!"

"Such was it in the 4th century."

"So begins our reverie."

"The Empire was in deep decay."

"And yet cruel Caesar did naught but play."

"Mired were they in decadence."

"And if you want a rhyme, get bent."

They bowed. A fat, balding man in a toga entered from the right.

"LEGATE!" shouted the man.

"Leg it?" replied the Legate, as she lifted her skirt, giving the audience a full view of her legs. She winked.

"Egads woman, have you no shame?" asked the man.

"No, do you?"

"Good point! Legate, I need you to defeat the enemies of the Empire!"

"I hear and obey, o Caesar!"

"Excellent! If you can defeat both the Celts and the Germans, the Empire may yet be saved! No one will ever doubt the martial valor of

those from Italy."

"Roma Victrix!"

The Emperor walked off. The Legate waited a few moments, then sat down.

"So what's the plan?" asked the Legionary.

"Plan...?" replied the Legate.

"You know, the plan. We have to defeat the enemies of the Empire!"

"Nah. I'm going to take a vacation instead."

"A vacation? Are you going to go see a play?"

"A play? By Jupiter, why would I do such an awful thing?"

"Well, why not?"

"Acting is the world's oldest profession."

The two of them turned towards the audience and made an expression that would be called the "Dreamworks Face" by future generations.

"So what are you going to do then?" asked the Legionary.

"I'm going to relax," said the Legate.

"B-b-b-but how can you relax at a time like this?"

"It's easy. You just sit down with some nice wine and pasta and enjoy sunshine, brother."

"But you owe the Empire."

"I don't believe in paying my dues. I'm a true Italian that way."

In the audience, an Englishman snickered.

"But the barbarians will destroy all of Rome's culture! All the statues and temples will fall!"

"So?"

"All of our books will be burned! Science and learning will be lost to the ages!"

"So?"

"You will be shaming your ancestors with such cowardice. What would your father say? He would not approve!"

"So?"

"They will destroy the wine fields of Gaul!"

"Wait, what?"

"And burn down all the olive groves!"

"THOSE FIENDS! We have to stop them! Quickly, to the galleys!"

They ran to the other side of the stage.

"Legate, where are the galleys?" asked the Legionary.

"I don't know," said the Legate.

Then there was a tremendous thunderclap and flash. A muscled, bearded man descended from above, suspended by wires.

"By the Gods, it's Jupiter!" exclaimed the Legate.

"NAY. I AM WHO I AM. I AM A FAR GREATER POWER THAN ANY GOD! I AM THE DIRECTOR! I PROCLAIM THAT THERE ARE NO

GALLEYS, FOR THE BUDGET IS NOT NEARLY LARGE ENOUGH!" said the DIRECTOR.

"Then how will we get to the Celts?" asked the Legate.

"ABRACADABRA, ALAKAZHAM! POOF! BEHOLD, YOU ARE NOW THERE!"

Then the DIRECTOR walked offstage.

"What was that?" asked the Legionary.

"A Deus Ex Machina," said the Legate.

"What do we do now?"

"I have a plan A and a plan B. Plan A is to defeat them."

"And plan B?"

"I poison my glove, then we lose like sissy girlies. When their warrior queen comes to shake my hand like a good sportsman, she'll die from the poison."

"You're so smart. I wish I could be as smart as you."

"I wish I could be as smart as me too. Look, Queen Boobica comes!"

The fat, balding man from earlier returned, now in a corset with two watermelons awkwardly stuffed inside. His jowls were caked with rouge.

"Oi, it's the Romans!" shouted Boobica.

"We've come to defeat you," said the Legate.

"That's funny, innit lads? Me crew gonna wreck you. Prepare your anuses," said Boobica.

"Don't worry, we have a secret weapon," said the Legate.

"Is it our wooden swords?" asked the Legionary.

"Better! Our wooden armor!"

A Celt came up and punched the Legate. He jumped back and screamed.

"Ack, splinters! Alack, I am slain! Thus ends the poor life of this nameless man, one of many, one of few. He shuffles off this this mortal coil to suffer no more. Alas, Fate is fickle and seen fit to slay me. Oh, how short and pointless is existence, all of us mere mayflies against the backdrop of eternity! Oh, the briefness! The brevity! The utter QUICKNESS of it all! How fast a man perishes, how fast all his achievements are rendered ashes. I am dying friends, I am soon to be dead. Do not cry for me, instead, laugh for how I have lived. Laugh long and love long, that is the best vengeance one can make. Do not surrender so quickly, though I am now deceased. Remember me, but do not dwell on me! Now, my breath quickly fades. Goodbye! Goodbye! I now die! I am dying! I am dead. Argh. Ugh. Bleck. Oof!" said the Celt. He fell over.

"uwotm8," said Boobica. Then the Legate poked her with a sword and she fell over as well. The melons popped out of her corset and rolled into the audience.

"Well, that was easy," said the Legate. "One down, one to go. Across the Rhine we go!"

"The Rhine is in Britain, right?" asked the Legionary.

"Thanks to the power of plot, it is now!"

"What do we have to do here?"

"We need to defeat Arminius and recover the lost standards."

"Lost standards? I happen to think I carefully consider each relationship before engaging in any sort of untoward activity."

"No, the other kind of standards."

"Aquilas?"

"Am I a killer? No, just a motivated woman."

A tall, blonde woman with bright green eyes and a pearly white smile flashed her sword at the two Romans.

"Who dares challenge Arminius? Who dares cross the Rhine and fight the German people?" asked Arminius.

"I dare! Legionary, go recover the standards while I distract this German harlot!" said the Legate.

"Right away, sir!" said the Legionary.

"Harlot? Who are you calling a harlot? I challenge you to a duel!" said Arminius.

"Very well then, let us cross swords," said the Legate.

"Show me your honor!"

The Legate drew her sword.

"No, your other honor!" said Arminius.

"My other honor? You don't mean...?"

"Aye."

"But t-t-that's forbidden love!"

"In weak, pathetic Rome, perhaps! But you will soon see the Furor Teutonicus firsthand!"

Their lips drew close to each other, and the Legate could feel Arminius's hot breath on her face. The Legate's hands moved down to her skirt, tugging at it.

A brick wall moved on stage, two laborers waving cheerfully as moans and panting filled the air. The wall was labeled "Hadrian Incorporated, for all your blocking needs!". It soon passed, but it was immediately replaced by a cardboard cutout of a boat. Inscribed on the boat were the words "Carthago: Shipping, Vast Tracts of Land, and Food for Thought."

"Well, that was sure exciting!" said the Legate.

"I'm very glad no one was watching that," said Arminius.

"I've got the standards, Legate! Let's get out of here!" said the Legionary.

At that, both ran away as fast as they could. Arminius exited the stage.

"I can't believe all of that worked," said the Legionary.

"Of course it did. The Forces of Good and Civilization will always triumph over the Forces of Not Nice, Bad Guys, and Savages. We must always endeavor to spread the values of the West to all others we meet. Homosexuality, Sodomy, Citizenship for all so long as they fight foreign wars on foreign soil, Bloodsport, Slavery, these are the values that make the West great! And they will never falter! God save the Queen!"

"Which one?"

"I don't know, which one is sponsoring us?"

Caesar returned, a smile wide on his face.

"I can't believe you've done it! You've defeated all of Rome's enemies and saved the Empire! Civilization will not fall! The light of

Rome shines eternal! Here, let me shake your hand," said the Emperor. As soon as he grabbed the Legate's glove, he began to foam at the mouth and shake, and soon toppled over. For a moment, everyone was still. Then he began to stand.

"I'm okay, not sure what just happened," said the Emperor. He reached up, grabbed the Legate's hand to steady himself, then screamed and fell over again.

"Well, shit," said the Legate. "If anyone asks, it was the Germans."

"And if we shadows have offended," said the Legionary.

"Go fuck yourselves, the play's now ended!" said the Legate.

Everyone returned to the stage and bowed.

"I'm sure this is an allegory for something, but I'm not sure what it is," said Tatiana.

"I want to meet the actresses!" said Anielka.

"Really? Actors tend to be... rather low-brow people," said Tatiana.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. It's better than sitting around smelling vomit, right?"

"True enough. Alright, let's go."

They pushed forward, through the crowds. Tatiana spotted the captain entertaining a few noblemen with his glowing golden coin, a trinket supposedly stolen from the Greek gods. With a simple flourish, he made it shoot lightning. Tatiana watched for a moment, then moved on. Probably fake anyways. They ducked into the curtains and went backstage.

"Hey there, something the matter?" asked the Legate.

"No, nothing, I just wanted to see you and talk to you in person," said Anielka.

"Did you enjoy the show?" asked the Legate.

"Oh, it was absolutely splendid," said Anielka.

"Honestly, it was a bit too vulgar for my tastes," said Tatiana.

"Tati! How rude!" said Anielka.

"No, no, she has a point. I personally prefer classier productions. Still, a job is a job," said the Legate. "I suppose I should introduce myself. You can call me Aleksandra."

"How does one get into your profession?" asked Tatiana.

"Well, as long as I could remember, I dreamed of the arts and of being famous. Of course, my father never approved. But one day, the Count of Inowroclaw came for his customary card game, a bit of Bastard Brag. I knew he fancied theater, so I floated the idea past him. Just like that, father was overridden. I had my foot in the door," said Aleksandra.

"So he had to go along with it," said Tatiana.

"Nope. We didn't talk to each other for the next fifteen years."

"... but that means you started talking again. What happened?"

"He started hearing more. One day, he sent a letter to me, begging me to come back to the estate. He asked my forgiveness, said I was his flesh and blood and that family was everything."

"And you forgave him."

"I cussed him out. The man had cut me off, and now, only now that I was successful, did he call for me? All that wasted suffering, all that struggle with no one to watch out for me. He had abandoned me."

"But..."

"But, as my kids grew older, they started drifting from me too. They started trying their own paths, and I found myself uneasy. It's a hard thing, dealing with change. We live in a tumultuous era, where all the old stereotypes and traditions are being reworked or thrown out. A world of wood is becoming a world of steel and concrete. That can't be easy for anyone to deal with. So we reconciled."

"You had kids?"

"Yeah, three."

"I would have never expected that. You're in lovely shape."

"Anyone would be skinny if they traveled as much as me. This food's barely edible. At least I get to travel in luxury on the company dime. Though, to be honest, sometimes I think about paying for my own passage and keeping the cost of travel. These tickets are the same amount of money as my wages, after all. Then I remember how terrible the Cholera Clippers are."

"But you would save a lot of money?"

"They wouldn't allow it anyways, too much risk. They even have five thousand pound insurance policies on all of us."

"I see. Thank you for sharing. This must all be very personal for you."

"Oh please, I'm an actress, I love sharing and getting attention. Besides, I already wrote a book about my life. It didn't sell."

"Thank you for your time, miss. Say goodbye, Anielka."

"Goodbye Anielka," said Anielka.

"We made it, Anielka. Welcome to America."

And the sun kissed the sea as it dipped over the horizon, the boats swaying gently in the harbor's tide and New York wind.

But she felt a twisting in her stomach. It was clear that her journey was not over. Not yet.

Ribs in Peas

"And it was abundantly clear to me that I now sat in the belly of the monster. It is an apt comparison, I think, to liken an army to a machine. Its inputs are industry and manpower, its output death. In Corona, I saw the machinery of the army at an all-encompassing height, an army with a state rather than a state with an army. Everything proceeded in perfect clockwork order, and even the celebrations were regimented and orderly. Never have I seen a people with more perfect obedience for their ruler. It is popular to speak of national spirits, zeitgeists. It is a good explanation for why some institutions succeed greatly in one nation and fail utterly in another: they are rejected by the very character of the people. Behind this perfect facade of the beloved Queen, I saw something terrible and eldritch. If anyone is animated by the spirit of their nation, it is this Rapunzel of Corona. Warm, inviting, friendly, and yet unbreakable and untamable, the steel will of a conquering people. I dared not look into those perfect emerald eyes, lest I succumb to that ancient Prussian beast and join that unyielding order.

It is a swarm of locusts, this country, and at the center is their hive queen, the intelligence that orchestrates the plague. She is their goddess." - Anonymous

"Want. It is what drove us. In this, at least, they are right. But I would like to clarify, clarify for posterity's sake. It was not want of gold, or glory, or any of those mortal desires. I was just beginning my true manhood when the light disappeared. I had gone through turbulent adolescence, self-absorbed, narcissistic young adulthood, and had settled down and received an officer's commission. And then I felt a tremendous void within myself, a consuming, yearning void. I tried to fill it with more wealth, more rank. I clawed my way up to the general staff. And yet it wasn't enough. Only now do I realize the truth. We wanted, desperately, to get the light back. Perhaps that caused the Great War. But it is gone and perished forever, and never again will the world see it. But, for a brief time, I saw the light. We all did. And

should only one thing remain of my memory, I want it to be this: We saw. We believed." - Anonymous

"I like Hell, there's free ice cream and lots of candy!" - John Doe

Crown Prince Karl Frederick sauntered out onto the sidewalk, pierogi snug in his gut. He waved one last time to the owner of the milk bar, then set off.

Two Elves and a Korean waved cheerfully at him, offering up some fairy dust and Korean BBQ. He kept walking. It was always a trap. Sure, it may seem free, but then they get your email, your phone number, everything. Luckily, he had given them a fake last time. Others weren't so prudent.

Now they had to go to church every Sunday. He saw them, always in their Bibles, always thinking about Jesus. It was absolutely terrifying. Koreans and Elves, those wily bastards. He shuddered.

He took out an e-cig. It helped. A bit. The shakes were still there. Goddamn, how long had it been? He knew. He always knew. 68 days, 12 hours, 9 minutes, and counting. Too long, far too long.

He should have never gone to Switzerland. But it was too late now. Besides, the lure of gold was too tempting. Who could resist the untold millions stashed away in the legendary Tomb of Pascal, the buried bullion of Bismarck's Reptile Fund interred next to the namesake of the trove, an fortune waiting for any bold enough to plumb the depths of the Swiss Alps and the catacombs of Tartarus?

Besides, who could have possibly thought he would actually find the damn tomb? It should have been just a normal vacation to the Land of the Dead. Come see the beautiful and endless gem mines of the land of the Helvetii, people of the rich land. Come see the sapphire-like lakes by the Alps, then relax by a warm, soothing pool of fire. It would've been nice. Instead, he got... this.

Home sweet home.

He unlocked the door and went inside. Staring him in the face was a giant picture of an ape with a club labeled "Kultur" carrying a woman away. The ape had long blonde hair. It was captioned "Stop this mad brute!" What vandal could possibly...

Of course, it had to be Rapunzel. He sighed.

He climbed the stairs, turned the corner, and bumped into his brother.

"Ommph," said Karl.

"Hi!" said Eugene Frederick.

"Hello Freddo," said Karl.

"Why are your eyes so red?" asked Freddo.

"Because I can't sleep and I can't eat."

"Sick or something?"

"FREDDO, I CAN'T JACK OFF?"

"... What?"

"I can't masturbate Freddo."

"... What?"

"I haven't been able to masturbate for 68 days, 12 hours, and 23 minutes."

"You've been counting?"

"Yeah."

"Why can't you masturbate anyways?"

"It's Rapunzel," said Karl.

Freddo scratched his head, confused.

"What's that have to do with jerking it? Can't you just get some tissues and some lotion and wank?" asked Freddo.

"If only it were that easy," said Karl.

"It sounds that easy to me," said Freddo.

"What happens if Rapunzel floats in and sees me watching porn? What happens if she shows up when I'm cumming? Good God, what happens if she shows up and I cum on her?! That's like... turbo incest," said Karl.

"Have you tried to talking to her?" asked Freddo.

"... No, actually."

And that was that.

The history of Switzerland begins with its conquest by the Romans. The old Celtic religions were steadily displaced by Roman practices. Of these, the strongest cult that would emerge in Switzerland would be the cult of Hades/Pluto. The people who had settled there named themselves after the great amount of gems they had found, and the later name, Switzerland, would come from the word "burning", referring to the vast flaming lakes scattered around the region. You see, Switzerland was in fact a giant portal to Hell. Although there are many naturally occurring passages to the underworld around the world, Switzerland is the largest. Hades, whose ego was bruised by many defeats at the hands of Hercules, took interest in the people dwelling above his realm. He decided to play games with them. For the next few hundred years, he would manipulate the region, teaching its inhabitants the secrets of necromancy, and playing Romandie and Alemannian against each other.

When the region was absorbed into the Kingdom of the Franks, he felt a slight twinge of pain. In truth, he had to come to love the pitiful, puny, scrawny, pathetic mortals. It had helped him grow up.

As time passed, the region slowly regained its independence. It soon was embroiled in the conflicts around it. Swiss necromancers and warlocks made names for themselves as legendarily effective mercenaries, their hordes of undead pikemen dominating countless battlefields. Swiss armies marched on, expanding the territory of the young confederation.

They had to be stopped. The Pope called upon the French to bring an end to Switzerland's aggressive conquests. If these armies of the dead continued, they might bring a thousand years of darkness down upon Europe! Thus, the French went to war against the Swiss, and inflicted such a crushing defeat that the Swiss swore eternal neutrality. The necromancers retreated to their mountain homes and the Swiss threat was ended. For the next few centuries, Switzerland would be a peaceful oasis in a chaotic and turbulent Europe. Although power slowly consolidated in the hands of a select few necromantic families, and there were instances of political and religious instability, the country remained relatively tranquil as the world burned around it.

Elsa sprawled over the couch. She stretched her arm out blindly, groping around for the remote. After a few moments, she latched onto it. She murmured a few soft curses under her breath and then grunted. The TV hissed and flickered to life.

Goddamnit.

Anna came running in from the next room over.

"Is that Doctor Who? I love Doctor Who!" said Anna, jumping up and down.

"Yes... it's Doctor Who. Why do you even like this show?" asked Elsa.

"It's like the GREATEST SHOW EVER!" gushed Anna. "And besides, do you even Superwholock?"

"... A wholock? Is that a kind of warlock?" asked Elsa.

Anna rolled her eyes.

"No, you silly-billy, it's a fandom. You take three of the greatest shows ever and mash them together. It's soooooooo amazing," said Anna.

"Those shows would be...?"

"Uhhh, duh. Sherlock, Doctor Who, and Supernatural."

"Explain."

"So Doctor Who is about this hot guy traveling around time fixing everything right?"

"And plot holes and nonsensical time mechanics and a poor understanding of the nuances of physics and misapplied ethics and a poor man's philosophy."

"Right yeah, and philosophy and ethics and other smart people things because it's a really smart show."

"And Supernatural?"

"So that's about these two hot guys that hunt demons and ghosts and other bad hell things."

"Like... us?"

"Uhhh... hrmmm."

"Don't worry about it. Let me guess, Sherlock is about a hot guy solving mysteries?"

"Wow. Elsa, you're a genius. They're all so dreeeaaammmy. I wish I could sleep with them."

"What about Kristoff?"

"Obviously he'll be there. What kind of a wife would I be if I didn't invite my sweet hubby to have fun with some of the hottest, best guys ever?"

Why did he put up with her? For that matter, why did she put up with her?

Well, that was obvious. Anna had them both wrapped around her perfect little finger. She was an angel, a avenging aspect of some distant goddess sent down to Earth. A very angry, strong goddess. With freckles. Those beautiful freckles. Those eyes. Those full lips.

Oh for fuck's sake, she was not going to go down this road. Her forty-third birthday party was enough. And the wedding celebration. And that one time in Paris. Goddamnit. It was enough to make her into an alcoholic except she already was an alcoholic, so perhaps some sort of double alcoholic, enough to make her spontaneously transform into a Russian, or perhaps an Irishman or a Czech. Absolutely absurd. She wanted to grab her and scream. You are married! You are hundreds of years old! "You've killed thousands upon thousands of people, several hundred of those by your own hand, and participated in countless wars and international crises! Why are you acting like some middle schooler posting sassy gifs on tumblr?"

"Excuse me?" asked Anna.

She... she just said that out loud.

"I... uhhh... so did you try out those games I showed you?" asked Elsa.

"Oh yeah, they were really fun! I liked that space war one and the spooky zombie one! The zombie one reminds me of Manananggal hunts in the Philippines. Ooooh, and I got a gold star in the space one!"

"That must be gold league. Mind showing your profile?"

"No, not at all," said Anna.

They went up to Anna's room.

"See? It's that gold star," said Anna.

Anna was in Grandmaster league.

It was moments like these that always confused her. Was Anna really a mastermind? It would explain a lot of things. To be honest, she often suspected it. Pure, innocent, naive Anna was just a carefully constructed front to keep her comfortable. Anna was a smart lass, after all. And Anna valued her sister's well-being above everything else. Would it really be so hard to put up an act for decades on end? Pretend like nothing had changed even the whole world was falling apart around them?

"And I played that zombie game too! I did co-op with Rapunzel!" said Anna. "We did a Let's Play!"

This ought to be interesting. Shotguns were better than Leons, but human partners could do quite well. What tricks did Anna have? Anna, the deadliest woman to ever grace the north, the Demon.

Oh god. Oh god. What was she doing with that gun? No, don't shoot that! Anna was worse than the AI. How was that even physically possible? Why? WHY?

It was moments like these that dashed all that previous speculation. One of them was a force of nature, and it most certainly was not the one with magical winter powers. She had imagined all sorts of sisters stuck in her little self-imposed isolation. Was her sister a brave knight questing to save her? Stoic and noble? Wild? Dark and mysterious? Who was she, really? She talked to the portraits, brooded. How absolutely dangerous.

How absolutely ridiculous. A poor red-headed stepchild minus the stepchild bit, lost in ignorance and neglect. Her parents had forgotten their healthy child to focus on her, the freak. Poor Anna had grown up truly alone. Ignorant and oblivious. But... that hadn't stopped her. No, she was strong. Inhumanly strong, and not just physically. The world could challenge her and she would break the world instead. She was unstoppable. Like a rock. She was her rock. A point of perfect stability to build a life on. That was it, wasn't it? Her ignorance was her strength. She would fight her way through everything, not understanding or changing, not giving a single inch to anything. Banner in hand, she strode across the world. She was Athena. She was Nike. She was Liberty Leading the People. She was a goddess. Anna had power she could never dream of. Dirt and sweat mixing on her furrowed brow, blood spattered across her uniform, standing in front of a battery daring them to fire, daring them to fight and face the consequences. Because she would win. Because she was the embodiment of war, of fighting for what you believe in. In her own way, the apex of mankind. She was Kveld-Ulf, cutting through countless foes to avenge his brother, the berserker archetype that Elsa had never understood until she saw Anna at work. Anna was caught in a trance of pure love.

She was doing it again. Goddamnit. Why did she always do this? Look, it's Elsa! Oops, she just tripped and fell face-first into her sister's vagina, ha ha! She always punished herself for it, but to be quite honest, she could have gotten away with it easily. If the Austrians could have their sexy gay parties, and the Englishmen their adultery, and Cathy her sex with horses and half of the entire Commonwealth, and the French their everything French, then she

could have a little incest. Even a lowly poet could get away with it. She was QUEEN. She was literally the most important person in all of Arendelle's history. She was Elsa the Magnificent, the culmination of generations of breeding and training, engineered to be the perfect girl and queen. Who was going to stop her? She had unlimited privilege, it was her birthright. It wasn't like she was born a peasant (she mentally corrected the word to commoner), forced to hole up in a room and bottle up her desires until she burst into tears. Sure, some people might complain and even rebel, but they always did that! She could've had snow golems giving chocolate blowjobs everywhere and someone would still complain the blowjobs were too sweet and start a riot. The converse was also true. If the world was going to hell, people would start killing each other just to make the descent even faster. The common folk were impossible to truly satisfy. She would not spill any sort of pasta, and even if she did, the syncophantic dogs all around her would fight to lap it up.

The truth was that she didn't really want to. Oh sure, she wanted to, in the same way a dieter wants chocolate, but she also didn't want it. She didn't want it with every fiber of her body, even as her heart threatened to pop like some depraved firework. If there was one thing she had learned in her late night cocaine revels with Freud, it was that. If there was another thing, it was that she was secretly a futanari with dreams of fucking her father, herself, her mother, her cousin, a dog, her own id, herself, the sky, herself, herself, the ocean, a hypothetical black-haired evil version of her, herself, her sister, that lout Hans, a dolphin, herself, and the metaphysical concept of truth. She was pretty fucked up. Still, it was pretty bad. It didn't help that parents were far, far too supportive of it. As it turns out, a violent death by drowning followed by years and years of unending torment do things to minds. They wanted nothing more than her love. What would they say? Oh, Elsa follow your dreams. Elsa, you deserve happiness. Elsa, do whatever makes you happy. Elsa, love is real and it's searching for you. Elsa, you are perfect the way you are.

Elsa, just be yourself. Elsa, you're a beautiful person.

Those weren't just coming from her head.

"Hey Elsa, are you okay? You've been staring at me for the past five minutes," said Anna.

"Shh. Do you hear that?" asked Elsa.

Elsa looked out the window. Sure enough, her parents were there. Her father was waving a sign with "Incest is wincest" on it. Her mother was wearing a "Love is all you need" T-shirt. Bloody hell.

"Mom, dad, it's two in the morning! Just because days and nights don't really exist in Hell doesn't mean you should be out at this hour!" shouted Elsa.

"We support you! You can make your own decisions!" said Elsa's mother.

Elsa's father lifted up a boombox and began to blast a mix of sappy 80s love songs. Jesus Christ.

This was her family. Her horrible, messed-up family. Her dysfunctional train wreck of a family. It was like a slow-motion explosion. A head bursting open. A hare slowly being swallowed whole by a snake. Hell was truly other people. She had a snowball's chance here.

Elsa smiled. It wasn't so bad. Everyone always forgot about the Ninth Circle.

The Ancien Regime was brought to an end in Switzerland by Napoleon. Though the nobility would regain power after the Napoleonic Wars, the genie of liberalism was now loose, and it could not be bottled again. The middle class and lower class, eager to join in the trends of Victorian respectability, began to act out against their predominately Catholic overlords. Their religion became a rallying point against the old order. The perceived impiety and oppressive

conservatism of the upper class was contrasted with the wholesome and moderate values of the Protestant cantons and their populace. The Young Swiss and members of the ongoing religious revival joined forces to form the Arma Christi, a name chosen to symbolize both their faith and their willingness to fight the evils of the old order. Tensions finally boiled over as the Springtime of Nations arrived. The Catholic aristocracy went to the old dragon graveyards, remnants of Louis XIV's great dragonslaying spree across Europe, and raised several bone dragons as well as legions of skeletons. The Arma Christi looked to their faith to protect them. Their faith was rewarded. As the skeletal dragons descended upon them, they suddenly crumbled to dust. The remaining undead forces soon followed, disintegrating as great beams of light descended from the heavens. The Catholic cantons sued for peace.

Negotiations were difficult, and almost stalled completely. However, when all hope of peaceful compromise seemed lost, Hades rose up from the Underworld. With his help, all parties were able to come to a satisfactory agreement. Thus was born modern Switzerland. To this day, Hades is beloved for saving the country and teaching the ancient Swiss necromancy.

Peace was once again interrupted with the onset of WWII. The Third Reich dreamed of conquering all lands ever ruled or settled by Germanic people. This included Switzerland. Switzerland would not surrender easily. The Nazis soon found that the Swiss were more than willing to destroy their own infrastructure to impede their advance, and that each dead Nazi meant the rise of another Swiss fighter. Attempts to cow the civilian population through intimidation and violence only hardened their resolve. In 1945, critically weakened by internal strife, the Nazis pulled out of Switzerland, their forces pursued by a horde of Nazi zombies.

Peace once again returned to Switzerland, but not for long. In 1963, the Coca-Cola Company released Tab. As it turned out, Tab's composition was highly disruptive to global mana currents, and necromancers soon found it difficult to raise or communicate with

spirits deceased before 1963. They sued. Switzerland v Coca-Cola Company became the court case of the year, drawing massive media attention around the world. Seeing a chance to weaken their hated rival, Pepsi stepped in to fund the Swiss lawyers. Events further escalated in 1964, with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Martin Luther King. The Coca-Cola Company acted to stop racism in Atlanta regarding the celebration, and decided to use the good PR to its favor in the court case. Pepsi countered by pointing out Coca-Cola had hardly driven the movement and was merely grabbing the coat-tails for its own personal gain. The race was on.

Pepsi was the drink of white supremacists. Coke's Tab caused bladder cancer. All Pepsi drinkers went to Hell (Technically true, but misleading. Heaven's limited capacity filled up early in the 1st century, and thus everyone goes to Hell. The Underworld is mostly a nice place, though Tartarus is a bit of a ghetto.) Coke was guilty of driving millions of spirits away from their loved ones. The case was eventually settled, but the battle between the two beverage giants raged on. Advertising campaign after advertising campaign was rolled out in what journalists called the "Soulda Wars". Chernabog, an ancient Slavic god and avid Coke drinker, was appalled at Coca-Cola's treatment of Switzerland. Chernabog was exiled from Russia following its revolution and found refuge in Switzerland. In remembrance of his friends, the Mighty Handful, he played Mussorgsky's Night on Bald Mountain nightly, a performance that would inspire the sequence in Fantasia and become a major Swiss tourist attraction. His endorsement of Pepsi ushered in a new age of celebrity endorsements. For two entire decades, the Soulda Wars would rage fiercely, but eventually the advertising costs grew crippling, and both companies agreed to cut back on marketing.

Switzerland was again at peace.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" asked Rapunzel.

Deep breath. Stay calm.

"Well, this is DotA, it's a sort of activity I play on this machine over here. Listen, there's something I've been meaning t-" replied Karl.

"DotA? Wait, is that a video game? Ooooh, is it like World of Warcraft?" asked Rapunzel.

"Wait, how do you know about WoW?" asked Karl.

"Me and Eugene have accounts, silly. I play a Sun Elf Warlock and he plays a Troll Rogue."

"Don't you mean Blood Elf Warlock?"

"Pssh, that's silly. It's called the SUN-well, not the BLOOD-well. They're happy friend elves, not vampires. And being a warlock means I get to summon a lot of cheerful funtime pals!"

"But they're demons."

"But I'm a demon."

"No, you're a ghost, it's different."

"Both these things come from hell, I don't see much of a difference. One's spiky and the other isn't, but does that mean a sea urchin ghost is a demon?"

"Uhh... so why a Troll?"

"I know, right? I wanted him to be a Blood Elf male so we could wear matching slutmog!"

"Actually, I think I understand now."

"He does a great troll accent in bed."

"... Excuse me?"

"Oh yeah, after we saw that Goldshire thing, we totally had to do that."

Activate containment protocol A.

"... whips and chains..."

Emergency, emergency.

"... reverse anal ectoplasmic fisting with a bit of timeclone double penetration..."

Warning, danger close.

"... atomic boob rodeo with a side of horizontal non-Euclidean monster mash..."

Brain status: Critical.

"... engaging the jazz-hands based synergistic team sensitivities in regards to semenological sexology..."

There is no God.

"... and then Kel'thuzad walks into the bar, and the aristocrats stop telling their joke because hand-holding in the dark for the purposes of procreation..."

Or if there is, He is long dead.

"In conclusion, you have to find creative ways to keep things interesting after two centuries of marriage, Lwow is Coronan clay, Wilno we don't forgot, we steal all of Austrian horses, and you will never find the Coronan horses. What were we talking about? Oh, can I play your game?"

Karl nodded mutely and then shuffled outside.

He returned an hour later.

"No business but war. No family but death. No mercy but the grave!" roared Rapunzel, her whole body glowing beet-red. Karl frowned. His entire keyboard was smeared with ectoplasm.

"Are you okay?" asked Karl.

"Rest is for the dead! Good day to fight!" shouted Rapunzel.

"I... uhh... guess you're having fun then?"

"I like games!"

"Alright, can I have my computer back then?"

"Oh, of course, sorry. Hey, what's that?" asked Rapunzel.

Karl looked. Nope.

"Eh, don't worry about it," said Karl.

The last thing he needed was more of that sun nonsense.

"Listen, I really... uhhh... wanted to talk about something?" said Karl.

"Uh-huh," said Rapunzel.

"Yeah, and uhh..."

Fuck. Maybe it would be easier to call the ghostbusters. Somewhere, a Sonny executive cried. Their precious name was being used for generic ghost containment businesses rather than the movie! It was Band-Aid and Googling all over again.

"Hello? Are you okay?" asked Rapunzel.

"Y'know... and then sometimes!"

"I don't understand."

"Like with ducks and then one duck wants to be a swan or something?" said Karl.

Rapunzel tilted her head. Then her eyes lit up.

"And this little duck wants to go out on its own but the big duck won't let it?" said Rapunzel.

"Yeah, maybe the little duck wants a little freedom."

"I understand. I had the same problem with my sort of mom."

"I mean, we can still be friends."

"Right. I'm sorry for being so overbearing. I guess I forgot how time passed here in the real world. I've been neglecting a bunch of my duties back home anyways."

"Maybe I could visit you in Hell?"

"That sounds fun. I live on 4722 Eternal Damnation Road. It's by the volcano filled with screaming, burning vultures, you can't miss it."

It had been a week. To be honest, it wasn't the same.

He checked his news feed. Border tensions between Israel and Egypt. King Arthur wins Prime Minister position again, but announces intent to retire for next election. Rumors of ethnic cleansings against Fulani people in Burkina Faso. Republic of Tartarus applies for EU.

It was quiet. A nice time for reading.

He missed her.

His Steam window started flashing orange. There was a friend request from CyborgPunz.

The crown prince smiled.

"The world is changing too fast," said Anna.

"Why do you say that?" asked Rapunzel.

"Just look at people. They're becoming so... boring! Nobody fights anymore, nobody loves. Everyone is the same, they're all like rocks in a rock thing."

"Bricks in a wall?"

"Yeah, like bricks in a wall. Everyone lives by schedules and timetables instead of freely and with feeling. What happened to our passion? People don't even talk about sex that much anymore. It's... 'improper'. People are becoming lumps of flesh goo."

"I don't really know if that's true."

"Just look at war. The technology there is getting better every day. Soon generals will be able to command entire wars from luxury apartments while being fanned by pleasure slaves!"

"So what?"

"So what? Killing and sex are the two most intimate things you can do to a man. If those are both trivialized, what's left? If war becomes just something with numbers and calculations, it's math! Or accounting! Not war! People won't be people anymore."

"Why not?"

"Or maybe they'll compensate with way more sex. Maybe people will have TURBO-ORGIES in the streets in their fantastical flying machines and talking subways and have intercourse with three-dimensional moving pictures... imagine what wonders will exist in the year 2000? Imagine!"

"You know how this conversation ends."

"Yeah, I do. Why?"

"Bark. Bark bark."

Anna felt slobber on her face. She opened her eyes. An owl-faced lion with a worm's tail was licking her face. It purr-squawked as it rubbed up against her body.

"Awwwkkrrrrrrrr, the third winning lotto number will be 31 on September 17th, 2024, if and only if a rock rolls 32 degrees west of north on Haines Avenue in Piscataway, New Jersey at 3:17PM, December 3rd, 1981," said the demon.

Anna scratched its neck. She grabbed a lump of congealed fat and human hair from the top of her dresser.

"Does Harold want a demon snack?" asked Anna.

"Harold is a good boy if the sum of all positive numbers is $-1/12$ in this universe using certain techniques!"

"... I think that's a yes. Good Harold."

"In all possible pasts and futures, Harold loves you!"

"Awwwww," said Anna. She rubbed Harold's belly.

Anna looked outside her window and waved at the "sun", which was actually a black glowing eye covered in fungal growths and forged from the souls of a million dead infant animals.

"Hello Sun!" said Anna.

The Black Sun rotated to look at Anna. The leathery eyelid covering the flesh orb retreated, sliding backwards with the sound of nails screeching on a blackboard. Its iris dilated, showing images of thousands of innocent creatures dying in painful ways as a high-

pitching wailing filled the air. In its language, this meant "Hello Anna". Anna gave the sun a thumbs up.

The front door swung in. In stomped Elsa, a scowl on her face and a "Even in Death, I still serve... Coffee" shirt on her body. She took off her Starbucks hat.

"Why the long face Elsa?" asked Anna.

"Well, I'm working a lousy dead-end job in 214 degree heat. This really is Hell," said Elsa.

"I thought you said you'd be happier with less responsibility. Isn't a lousy dead-end job a good thing?"

"Have you read Brickman and Campbell?"

"No, reading's hard."

"Well, there's this concept called the hedonic treadmill. Happiness is like a treadmill. Are you following me so far?"

Anna's eyes widened in understanding and her mouth gaped.

"So what you're saying... is that you're secretly a treadmill!" said Anna.

"No-"

"I know it's hard, but you don't have to hide anything anymore. I understand everything, I'm here for you!"

"I'm not a-"

"Even if you were a cheaper type of exercise equipment, like a wall bar or dumbbell, I'd still accept you! Except you'd never be a dumbbell because you're not dumb."

Elsa sighed.

"I love you Elsa," said Anna.

"Yeah. I love you too," said Elsa.

Elsa dumped a packet of letters onto the kitchen table. She idly picked one up.

"Tell us how we're doing. Hell appreciates and welcomes your feedback! Every bit helps make Hell a nicer place to live," read Elsa.

"I give Hell 9.5/10. I think our internet speeds could be better," said Anna.

"Don't you think this should be a place of eternal torment and penitence for our sins instead?" asked Elsa.

"No, that sounds really unfun and kinda awful," said Anna. "Rapunzel wouldn't do that to us."

Anna placed the survey in an envelope labeled 4722 Eternal Damnation Road.

"I like Hell, it's fun," said Anna.

"It wasn't fun before," said Elsa.

"Well, that was the old Hell, back when that weirdo Satan ran everything."

After Satan rebelled against God, he went to Hades to rent a room to live. Hades, by then more interested in his little Swiss experiment, offered a lease-purchase contract on the whole underworld. Satan accepted. For a thousand years, he reigned in Hell, tormenting sinners while cutting himself and listening to My Chemical Romance. By the 1800s, however, Satan was suffering from a midlife crisis. He had been a rebel for so long, but now he was the establishment! He ran an institution that housed countless millions. He was supposed to be the great Adversary, to go against the grain and fight against

the machine, and yet he now was the machine! Hell was now far too mainstream for Satan.

While most denizens of Hell were immediately shunted off to their eternal punishments, Rapunzel was able to sweet talk her captor into letting her wander around Hell. She soon met Satan. And so, Rapunzel purchased Hell from Satan for 3 pounds, a half-chewed piece of gum, a banana sticker, and a promise to buy Satan some skinny jeans as soon as they were invented. With that settled, Satan moved to New York and became an artist.

Someone knocked on the door. Anna answered it. It was a creature with the face of a lion, the torso of a man, the lower body of a horse, and five goat legs.

"Hello President Buer," said Anna.

"Why howdy there, Anna, how are y'all doing this fine day?" asked Buer.

"Trying to win reelection as one of the Great Presidents of Hell?" asked Anna.

The Great Presidents of Hell were demon lords similar in rank to Great Princes, Great Dukes, Great Earls, Great Danes, Count Presidents, Great Taste Less Filling, and really any demon whose title started with Great. Of course, Great Presidents had to win Great Presidential Elections, unlike the other ranks of demon. Supposedly, Buer had been a botanist in 16th century Germany in life. Now he was the Great President of Anna's electoral district. Buer was a nice guy, but many unfortunate would-be demonologists had met their ends at his hands, following the unfortunate advice of the Ars Goetia to give him the finger and rattle off a list of threats.

"Sure as shooting, Anna. I may be a crook, but my opponent is an even worse crook! And he doesn't brush his teeth!" said Buer.

Anna gasped in shock. Elsa groaned.

"Well, I'll vote for you," said Anna.

"Remember, with Buer, you're sure!" said Buer.

Buer walked away and Elsa closed the door. Election season was always a chore.

"See, you're still sad, Elsa. You're at home and you're still sad," said Anna.

"Must be the weather," said Elsa.

"Why don't we watch the presidential debates?" asked Anna.

"Sure, whatever," said Elsa.

They went to the living room and turned on the TV.

"While my opponent is a good man, I'm sure, he doesn't have nearly enough experience in life. Y'see, I've always been a working man. My father worked his hands to the bone, and he told me, little Malphas, you have to work hard, real hard to get anything in life. Nothing's free, everything is bought with sweat and tears. S'why I organized unions, s'why I always stand behind the little guy. I believe in the little guy. I think you easily miss that looking down from an ivory tower like my esteemed opponent does. Theories are great, but theories don't always work! You know what else is a theory? Evolution. I rest my case," said Malphas.

"You're being ridiculous. My background as a liberal arts professor has nothing to do with my capabilities as an administrator, and I have proved myself working in several corporations and non-profits. Furthermore, the Theory of Evolution is extremely well-supported and accepted by everyone in the scientific community. All this leads me to conclude that you are a moron," said Gaap.

Elsa frowned.

"See? It's all the same. They're just mudslinging. Politics is the story of terrible people doing terrible things for terrible reasons. I should know," said Elsa.

"You seem angry," said Anna.

"Maybe I am angry! It's disgusting that millions of good people like us have to put up with incompetents and corrupt scoundrels in Hell's administration!"

"But you can change that!"

"You're right, I can change that. I was literally born to rule."

"That's right!"

"I'm going to run for President!"

"Yeah!"

"You and me, Anna, we're back in business."

"That's the spirit!"

Count President Queen Elsa. It had a certain ring to it, didn't it?

Author Notes: peperony and chease

Also, thanks to tamer for reading and Frac for suggesting Rapunzel's steam handle.

Religion I

"We resented the introduction of Jews into the social set of the Prince of Wales, not because we disliked them, but because they had brains and understood finance. As a class we did not like brains. As for money, our only understanding of it lay in the spending, not the making of it." - Daisy Brooke

Rothschild had just walked by, white as a sheet. Emperor Napoleon II raised an eyebrow and leaned on the wall. Moments later, Bismarck sauntered up, mug in his hand. He took a sip.

"Good afternoon, Your Imperial Majesty," said Bismarck.

"Do you know what on earth has gotten into that man?" asked Napoleon.

"I merely shared a few factoids about the current state of Maldonia. Why do you ask?" said Bismarck.

"... You enjoy making people uncomfortable, don't you?"

"Nonsense. I'm simply informing people about the world around them. If anything, it's a public service."

"But you never do that for me. Are you afraid?"

"Afraid of what? Thanks? I assumed that, based on your close relation to my dear little Rapunzel, that you had been afforded the finest education possible, and thus were not in need of any help. She cared for you deeply, your mother-in-law did. It's why she gave you support for your throne, all those small niceties," said Bismarck. He paused, and as almost an afterthought added: "Mother knows best."

"Clever."

"Oh, and one of the boys who I was advising on good vantage points for bird watching, he apparently got into a little dustup. Some fool was trying to sneak his way in with some grievance or another," said Bismarck. He took another sip of his drink. Napoleon glared at him.

"By the way, your auntie wonders why you don't write more often. Africa is quite hot, you know. Such a sweet old lady. She heard you might be in a bit of financial difficulty, so she went out of her way to contact Misters Kessel and Fould. I suppose a few hundred thousand here or there could be useful. No interest, of course," said Bismarck.

Bismarck smiled and sprawled over a chair, feigning idleness. The man was a damned cat, always looking to pounce. Napoleon grimaced.

"Isn't it funny? That man is terrified of war, but always profits most when it comes. How unlike the men of Corona, who are always beset by night terrors, weeping fits, and nervous breakdowns, yet relish war with every fiber of their being. I suppose it's true that poison is sweet and medicine always bitter," said Bismarck. He checked his watch.

"Dear me, it appears I'm late. I'm sorry Napoleon, but I promised to have lunch with someone," said Bismarck.

"Emperor Napoleon," said Napoleon II.

"Forgive me, it was always the custom in your mother-in-law's court to go on a first name basis," said Bismarck, and he wandered off.

Napoleon II continued leaning on the wall for several minutes. Then, he turned and punched the wall.

"Bastard!" shouted Napoleon.

Night fell over Paris. Napoleon II was at home, sitting by the bed of his granddaughter.

"Did you like the story?" asked Napoleon.

"Why don't you send some men to kill all the wolves? Then Little Red Riding Hood wouldn't have been in so much trouble."

"Well, I did. The Woodsman was just the first to arrive," replied Napoleon. He thanked God for little lies. "Do you have any more questions?"

"If Mr. Bismarck is such a poopyhead, why do you let him stay?" asked the little girl.

"He was my mother-in-law's man. Nobility is about family, even when it hurts," said Napoleon II.

"Then why'd you make Uncle go away?"

Napoleon drank some bourbon.

Bismarck poked the cut of venison. If his calculations were correct, and they always were, he would walk in... now.

Mr. Rothschild took off his hat and opened the door.

"I hear you are in the market for a ten million thaler loan?" asked Mr. Rothschild.

"Naturally. I'm looking to make the world's largest ball of yarn," replied Bismarck.

"And here I was, expecting old B to change."

"Please. Powerful men don't need change. It's far too heavy for the value, ruins the pockets."

Rothschild sat down. He took a bite of the meat. He frowned.

"It's cold," said Rothschild.

"Well, you're late," replied Bismarck.

"Venison?" asked Rothschild.

"Indeed."

"How are you doing these days?"

"Just reminiscing and stewing in my nostalgia, as is the lot of all old men."

"I suppose that is very true."

"Do you not remember when Austria and Corona were at each other's throats, and how your illustrious clan conspired to single-handedly float their finance and make them solvent? If they had taken your advice, things would be proceeding far more nicely for them too. But, alas, they would not. Such tactics would be dishonorable. And to be quite honest, that would not be a good outcome for you either. No, your kin admired Austria because of their honor. If they were willing to backstab and debase themselves, in short, to reduce themselves to the naked diplomatic aggressions of Corona, they would not be the country that earned your love. Perhaps it would've been good and sensible, but to breach honor for it would be too grave a cost."

"Indeed."

"And Bluchroder. Bluchroder has been of great service to me all these years. He has quite a few talents, no doubt learned in his apprenticeship and service to you."

"Only the best for one of my oldest and most loyal clients."

"You moved Heaven and Earth to save Austria, for it was yours to move. But the Sun rises high above even the Heavens. All the markets kneeled before you to deliver unto them a pound of flesh and countless tons of bullion. But it wasn't enough, was it? No, in the end, they would've had to sacrifice their nobleness."

"You speak as if you yourself are not fallible. I know you would have done anything to save her. All the nations of the Earth bowed before you... but that didn't help. You would've sacrificed yourself if need be, but it would've been pointless anyways. Without your expertise, she would've floundered. Your only option was to watch helplessly, as she, deprived of her one true love, wasted away."

"... You cut me to the bone. Then ther-"

"Are you deliberately trying to rile me up?"

"Good heavens, nothing of the sort. Why would I do that? You are my friend, Mayer Carl, and I am merely remembering the old times. Would I invite you to lunch just to stir you to anger?"

"No... of course not. I'm just upset right now. Look at this letter! Do you know what that scoundrel said? 'If all Jews were Rothschilds or Cremieuxs, then the situation would be different, but under prevailing conditions one could not blame the government if it sought to protect its people against such bloodsuckers.' Bloodsuckers! Do you know who the real bloodsuckers are? The damned Russians! Damn their capital deficit and damn Gorchakov and damn their feudal estates and damn their petty quarrels! And damn their Jews! Damn them all! I sometimes think the Jews bring anti-semitism upon themselves."

Mayer Carl was shaking now. Bismarck took a sip from his drink.

"I am sorry. I am so dreadfully sorry. I have ruined a wonderful lunch with my kvetching," said Rothschild.

"Think nothing of it. What are friends for?"

They finished up the meal. Mayer Carl put on his jacket and walked out. Bismarck paused for a moment, then left the room, returning to his private quarters to brood, as was his habit. He opened up his work, cast his eyes over it, then examined the room. Books and documents were strewn over the floor, and portraits sat propped up against walls, each of a different European monarch. Rapunzel's was the only one hung and framed. He took in a deep breath and began to write.

The clock tolled and he stirred from his self-imposed work trance. Pascal was resting on his hand. He twitched a finger and Pascal awoke. Bismarck stretched out and grabbed a newspaper.

"Let's see what the damned reptiles have to say... hrmmp," said Bismarck. He flipped idly through the pages then tossed it aside, mumbling curses as it fell to the ground. "Stupid, ever so stupid."

He began to point furiously into the air. "No, if she was here! If she was here... what changes could be made upon this miserable fools? Ach, the indignity of it!"

He stood. "No, Napoleon II is not half the man his father was. But his father, he was still, as Hegel said, 'the world soul on horseback'. And if only a fragment of that brilliant soul was bequeathed upon the son, it is still enough for my purposes. I have agitated him roughly today, and it is a wound he will not soon forget. He is tired and he tires, and the Turks and their games have no appeal for him. Before, perhaps a diplomatic reconciliation would have occurred, but now his mood is sour. He will threaten them with gunships and browbeat them, they will cower. If the seas are not open to the Ottomans, they must turn to the land. The prospect of a rail through the Balkans has long fascinated the Hapsburgs, but this must finally be enough to stir the slothful, indigent Austrians into action. Who else can finance this task but Rothschild? But he will exact a heavy price, I hope. I have awakened something in him, too. He is weary from age, and dying. He has forgotten what he is capable of. He reads the ridiculous letters from the Pale and wonders what kind of simple man can think him a lightning god. But in truth, his powers are far greater than any

pitiful Zeus. Is this not a just death for a king, even a king as pitiful as a Jew king? To make his enemies tremble and his allies submit in awe as he shakes the foundations of the Earth and tears open the Heavens one last time? Protection for the Jews of Romania, that must be the price. And for the Russians, this will be intolerable. But who can mediate? No one. And no one has the money that Rothschild has, this is certain. Not even bratty, up-jumped Americans, at least not yet. I will give that little brat sitting on his mother's throne the devil's choice. The British, with their unequaled sense for blood, will strike. Gladstone does not want Egypt, but the smiling jackals around him certainly do, and if he will not oblige, Disraeli will. Thus an entente. Thus, the entente."

Bismarck leaned back in his chair.

"She gave me love. What my mother never gave me. Let this be my sacrifice, let the flames of the nineteenth century burn a few years more with it. There is always more work to be done."

He took a sip of the bubbling Schwarzbier and champagne cocktail. He groaned.

"Soon enough, Pascal. Soon enough. Fools think that evil exists by God's admission. They are naive. In Heaven, too, there must be a balance of power."

He returned to his work. The next morning, his son checked in on him. Bismarck was sound asleep, pen still in his hand.

Anna and Elsa walked into the party. Elsa was wearing a Superman windbreaker over a T-shirt with "Install Gentoo" written on it. Anna was wearing a crudely hexagonal slab of rock.

"Hey there friendly folks! Hohoho! Merry Christmas! I came as the nation-state of France! And Elsa's dressed as a NEET," said Anna.

Elsa flinched.

"Anna... this isn't a costume party," said Elsa.

"Ooooh! Wait. Oh. Ohhh. Oh no. Oh my god. Oh my god, oh my god. I am so, so, soooooo sorry. I'm the worst! Why am I such a stupid, stupid, dumb-stupid idiot dumb? Did I just say that? I can't believe I just said that. And I'm saying this. And that. And that! It's like words are just vomiting out of my mouth like wordy word language vomit! And that was dumb too! I can only say dumb things. Because I'm dumb," said Anna. She began to hyperventilate.

"Anna. Anna. Hey. Calm down, everything's okay. There, there," said Elsa, patting Anna on the back. She retrieved a bottle of Jack Daniels from her pocket and popped it open. She took a deep swig. "See? Everything's better. I'm happy now."

Trumpets blared and everyone turned to look at a set of gilded double doors above a grand staircase. The doors flew open and out came Rapunzel, playing an electric guitar solo. She had a pair of cheap plastic horns and fake paper wings on. With a flourish, she threw them off, her eyes flashing red and an aura of flame surrounding her. With a single downward gesture, she tore open the earth, bringing forth a horde of ghastly wraiths, all of them bearing bags of party favors. Pillars of flame erupted from the floor, filling the air with the distinct smell of cinnamon. She pointed one hand towards the roof, and a pink horse with a mane of writhing fire descended from above. Rapunzel jumped onto the horse and rode around the room, scattering ashes and fairy dust everywhere. She finished her guitar solo and leaped down, creating a shockwave as she landed.

She held her arms open wide. "Great Satan or GREATEST Satan?" asked Rapunzel.

Rapunzel gasped.

"Anna, your outfit is so cute! I love what you've done with those shoes!" said Rapunzel.

"I'm France!" said Anna.

"That's so adorable. I need an outfit like that. Where'd you get it?" asked Rapunzel.

"I made it with rocks," said Anna.

"Elsa, why aren't you wearing a cute outfit like your sister? You always wear the same things over and over again. If it's not that, it's the ice dress, or that blue dress. Don't get me wrong, they're really nice, but variety is the spice of life! We've got to take you out shopping some time. It's like you only own five outfits," said Rapunzel.

"I do only own five outfits," said Elsa.

"We reaaaally need to give you a nice makeover," said Rapunzel.

"The last time I had a makeover... well... I had spiked my hair up and dyed it black, gotten a change of clothes, and then Anna confused me for a stranger and broke half of the bones in my body."

Anna coughed a little and looked sheepish. Elsa patted her on the back.

"Pffssshhh, it'll be fine. Elsa? Elsa. Oh," said Rapunzel. In Elsa's place was a perfect ice statue.

Anna screamed. Rapunzel pointed over to the bar.

"There she is," said Rapunzel. Anna nodded and ran off.

"There you are Elsa! Are you still drinking? You really shouldn't do that so much. A little bit of moderation is good for you," said Anna.

"Moderation? What is the point of moderation? Do you know the kalos kagathos of the Greeks? What is the point of moderation when

you pursue things which are goods in their own right? Moderating yourself would only result in less good," said Elsa.

"Uhh..."

"But... moderation is. And moderation must be. Moderation is a virtue of the Christian nobility. Noblesse oblige. We must serve our lessers. The ideal of the noble? To be a 'gentle' man. Chivalry, all this to make mice out of these men. And why? Because of **FEAR** . Because it is fine to lose control when everything you do is good, but what if you aren't good? What if you do evils? What if you're wrong? We bit the apple and knew the nature of good and evil."

"..."

"In lack of moderation we see the birthplace of tyranny. A lack of moderation is indulgence, and what greater indulgence is there than to disregard other opinions? To suppose other opinions are born of ignorance, payment, fanaticism, or any other sort of unreasonableness. It is, in effect, to reduce the world into thinking people that agree with you, and the unthinking, non-real masses. This, then, is the tyrant."

"You're not a tyrant."

"Of course not. I'm something far worse. The tyrant has the excuse of sincerity. The tyrant can genuinely believe himself. The tyrant has many cloaks to comfort him. He trusts in science, when scientists themselves know of Popper, know that they are merely Grail Knights on an impossible journey. He trusts in reason, when the priests of the Temple of Reason see the Holy of Holies is empty. Only a fool trusts pure reason. He prostrates himself before the priests and knights and thinks himself wise for it. But what of one who knows the consequences of their actions? Who realizes their own fallibility? It is permissible to sacrifice many in service of the greater good. But how can it possibly be permissible when there is no guarantee of good, when it is very likely to lead to evil instead? The only thing you are guaranteed in such a case is knowledge. It is monstrous to sacrifice

people not for goodness, but for knowledge alone. Democracy breeds tyrants, but aristocracy breeds a creature far worse. Is there any pain worse than the pain of doing evil willingly? It is an unrelenting agony."

Elsa brought her face in close to Anna's. She stroked Anna's hair and let her cold breath touch her sister's skin. They stared deep into each others eyes.

"And yet I do it. Again and again, these lives of innocents fed to the flame. I kill for no reason except my own curiosity. What is the point? What is the gain of my madness? What gives you purpose?" asked Elsa.

"I strike down the wicked and protect the righteous."

"You're too good a person to be my sister," said Elsa.

"You're wrong," said Anna.

Elsa turned back to her drink and took another gulp.

"It... it may be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness... but... but... there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier... and the world in general is immensely a... again... agander... uhh... a better place for it. Because of her," said Anna.

Elsa put down her drink and stood up.

"Alright. Let's go, Anna, you and I, we Gods of the Copybook Headers."

Elsa walked off. Anna stood around for a moment.

Then she pumped her fist and did a little dance before going to catch up with her sister.

"Could you hold this while I check something?" asked Elsa. She held out a bag.

"I would love to!" shouted Anna.

"Geez. It's just a bag," said Elsa.

"Well... uhhh..."

"What?"

"Two arms?"

"I... oh. Oh."

"I didn't mean to make this awkward," said Anna.

"I should have never taken you there," said Elsa.

"Why?" asked Anna. "Elsa, those were the best years of my life."

"How could those possibly be the best years of your life?" asked Elsa.

"I was with you, wasn't I? And I was useful, wasn't I? For one time in my life, I was with you and I wasn't holding you back. After that... you were always so busy. And I know you had a lot to do, and I don't blame you. I should've made more time for you too, but something would always come up, something I would have to deal with. But those years, they were... nice. Yeah. They were nice. That's a good word for it," said Anna.

Anna frowned.

"You're cold," said Anna.

"I don't get cold," said Elsa.

"If that were true, you wouldn't shiver so much," said Anna. She took off her France costume and unbuttoned her jacket. She handed her jacket to Elsa. Its medals clacked and jangled. "Here. Take this."

Elsa raised an eyebrow but took the jacket. Anna smiled.

Anna put her arm around Elsa's shoulder. They walked into the main dining hall.

His gear clanked and clinked, shifting uneasily around his body, the weight aching on his shoulders, an ache also felt deep in his bones. It was a grim reminder that he was no young man.

He took another step, adjusting his equipment again, one hand steady on his gun. But he was certainly no doddering old man yet. The world was now far too violent for old men to exist. Behind him, the thunderous crunch of treads and tires on broken roads. More than four thousand feet were pattering a rhythmic drumbeat against the worn dirt.

A tanker stuck his head out from his cramped little death machine.

"So this is Prague, eh? Looked better in the postcards," said the tanker. He laughed heartily. "Well, I always cared more about the women anyways. Czech girls, am I right boys? Prettiest ones in the world!"

A chorus of cheers came from inside the tank. The buildings surrounding them had been reduced to rubble, and a few burnt out ruins looked solemnly at the advancing soldiers. In the distance, artillery pounded away. The smoky sky was occasionally broken by bright flashes of light. Carrion birds circled overhead.

Three months. They had heard the rumors three months ago. The Hajduk Armored Irregulars had immediately changed course, rolling north towards Prague. The Nazis were supposedly reeling now, with their armies collapsing into disarray and mass revolt. It was towards

one of the rebel strongholds they now advanced. The rebels, affiliated with the Free Bavarian Army, had taken Prague Castle while back, apparently a week before the Royal Hungarian Army had gotten word.

"Your Majesty? Are you alright?" asked a soldier.

"Just thinking. It sounds like our Bavarian friends are still fighting. Hear that artillery? Definitely doesn't seem like a peaceful backwater to me," said His Majesty Charles IV of Hungary.

Horthy's letter had been exceptionally short. "It is time." That was all. Seven weeks later, Guderian was standing in Budapest. Horthy had been taken prisoner, sent to some ghastly Nazi prison. He had arrived in Hungary just in time to see one of his family's ancient fortresses renovated into a jail. The surviving units of the Hungarian army had fallen back to link up with the resistance. There, the generals had sworn allegiance to him, crowning him with the Crown of St. Stephen. Though the cross was even more crooked now, they had managed to smuggle the relic out before the museum, and the entire city around it, was shelled into dust. Though some of his advisers, such as former Propaganda Minister Adolf Hitler, now acting leader of the Third Reich, advised caution around such artifacts, in characteristic Coronan fashion, the now deceased Fuhrer put practicality before art.

Now the Royal Hungarian Army had arrived in lands formerly known as Czechoslovakia. The whole city was either burning or crumbling. As if to emphasize his point, more blasts came from the distance. The sound of gunfire soon followed.

As the gunfire abated, it was replaced by the sound of music. A thousand voices were now piercing the cacophony of a war-torn city. Charles' jaw dropped. It was the Bayernhymne.

They had held for three months. The Bavarians held the castle still.

The whistle of an artillery shell broke the music. A sharp crack, and then the avalanche-like sound of a thousand tumbling stones. Charles looked up to see a building tipping over.

The last things he heard were shouts of "The King!" Everything went black.

It was dark. A valkyrie stood before him, offering an a hand. Charles blinked and nodded, a bit groggy. He mumbled a few strands of garbled nonsense. She kept her hand outstretched.

"Am I dead?" asked Charles.

"Not yet. You've a long way to go and much more to do, Your Majesty. What would be the point of coming so far only to fail?" asked the woman.

She grabbed his arm and yanked him free of the rock. Charles stumbled to his feet and took a closer look at the woman. She was strikingly beautiful. She was wearing the outfit of a partisan, and the stub of a cigarette peeked out of her mouth.

"Come on, let's go," said the woman. She checked her watch. "Heh. Merry Christmas, Your Majesty."

"Wait! Who are you?" asked Charles.

"I'm a member of the Czech Resistance. A friend, in short. You can call me Rakouska. I'm taking you somewhere safe to stay the night," said the woman.

"But what about my men?" asked Charles.

"I'll inform them that you're fine. Just worry about getting to safety," said Rakouska.

"Rakouska? Does that mean anything?" asked Charles.

"It's a name. It doesn't mean anything," said the woman. She smiled and started walking.

Charles shrugged and followed her.

They passed by row after row of felled buildings. They scrabbled over scattered bricks. Charles dashed through a half-finished and now thoroughly damaged jungle of rebar and broken concrete. He went over a toppled statue of some long dead king, his statue now dead too. Through another street, this one littered with burning trucks and burning bodies, the air thick with the sweet smell of roasting flesh. A head stared at him, half of the face charred into unrecognizable blackness, an eye dangling from its stalk to dip into a muddy and red puddle, the other half locked into an unending scream. The uniform it was wearing was in tatters, shrapnel having cut tears throughout, save for the armband, which was immaculate. Charles began to walk slowly. His legs burned with pain. His lips were cracked and dry. His saliva was thick and gooey. Rakouska silently handed him a canteen and pulled him onto her back. He gasped out an apology.

"Don't worry about it," she said.

"Where are we going?" asked Charles.

"My father's house. Dr. Capek. Have you heard of him? He's a rather famous author."

Rakouska abruptly stopped. She stared at one of the ruins.

"What's wrong?" asked Charles.

"It's just that building. It used to be an alchemy lab, you know. It existed for your ancestor, Rudolf. One day, the master of that little shop presented his emperor a strange little potion. But you can't just feed your emperor all sorts of dubious substances, it's not quite proper. So the alchemist had his daughter drink. Poor Rudolf. Poor, poor Rudolf," said the woman. She sighed.

She left him at a small, run-down house. The roof had several holes patched over with planks of wood. Rakouska was gone before Charles could even thank her. Charles knocked on the door.

"Hello?" asked Charles.

A moment's hesitation. Then the sound of locks clicking open. The door opened.

Dr. Capek was waiting. He ushered him inside, then locked the door again, taking care to bar it. The fortress was now singing Ktoz jsu bozi bojovnici.

He watched the fortress as sleep slowly took him. The walls were crumbling and many a spot was patched over by sheet metal. Above it, flying high, were the Black-Red-Gold tricolor, the flag of Czechoslovakia, and the flag of Bavaria, all tattered and ripped from enemy fire, but still standing, defiant.

As he finally drifted into unconsciousness, he thought he recognized the voice of Horthy.

Rapunzel came in from a large set of doors. She was holding several puppies. They jumped out of her arms.

"Look! Puppies! I don't even know where they came from!" said Rapunzel, smiling.

"Ooooh, puppies! I love puppies," said Agdar. He rushed to one of the puppies and got down on all fours.

The puppy barked at Agdar. Agdar barked back. The puppy licked Agdar's face. Agdar licked the puppy.

"Oh God," said Elsa. "Why have you forsaken me?"

Agdar scratched the puppy on the belly.

"Dad, you're embarrassing me in front of Rapunzel and her parents and Anna and everyone and oh my God, oh my God, what are you doing?" said Elsa.

King Frederick William stood and pointed right at Agdar.

"That man," said Frederick William imperiously, "saved my life! And for that, I will be eternally grateful! And yes, we are well acquainted!"

"In fact," said Agdar dramatically, "I haven't even shown him my latest adventure! Into fashion! You see, I have bought tearaway pants!"

Elsa gaped. "Please no."

Agdar grabbed at his pants and yanked them off.

"I don't know what's happening. Why am I here?" asked Elsa.

Frederick William looked respectfully at Agdar's crocus-print underwear.

"Fear not! If your spawn is embarrassed, I will join you in solidarity!" said Frederick William. He took off his pants too.

"Aren't you going to do anything?" said Elsa, looking at her mother.

Idunn shrugged. "Boys will be boys," said Idunn.

"Do you think your father hasn't seen worse than this? **Felt** worse than this? We waded through fields of guts and gore together! Flirted with Death and gave her a good pounding! This? This is nothing for gallant gentlemen such ourselves! In fact..." said Frederick William.

He grabbed onto Agdar's testicles and began to grunt in a very non-homoerotic way. Agdar grabbed Frederick William's testicles in turn. They both started grunting loudly. Elsa fainted. The front doors swung open. In walked a young man wearing a powdered wig.

"Well, this is exactly what I expected," said the young man, his voice deadpan.

Frederick William's eyes flashed with anger. He rushed at the young man. The man grabbed the King's fist in midair. He smirked. He squeezed Frederick William's knuckles white, then gave him a single punch to the gut. Frederick William crumpled. His wife rushed to his side. Rapunzel gasped. She had only seen Freddy G in portraits.

"Charming, really. I'd expect you to do better, with all this time to practice," said Frederick the Great. "Well, I suppose I'd expect it if you weren't so incompetent. Ah well."

Frederick leisurely took a pinch of snuff. He looked straight at Rapunzel and walked toward her. She stood still.

Frederick the Great hugged Rapunzel.

He nodded. "You are everything my son should have been and wasn't. You are thrice the man he was. Ah, but you are no man. Mustn't dwell on it, though. Optimism and pessimism, after all. One's a glass half-empty, the other is a glass half-fool, and neither gets the whole drink."

He stepped back.

"I coddled the boy, I admit. He really never learned how hard life could be. He never learned how to really fight, which I suppose is his greatest sin by far. I gave him everything and he ate himself into a great hunger. And I suppose that was the greatest hardship of his life."

Rapunzel smiled and shifted back and forth, twiddling her fingers.

"I still recall what I did in great service to the state. It was the dead of night, and the fortifications were cloaked by thick brush. Heavens, it was bloody. Perhaps the most grisly mound of meat and flesh I have ever laid eyes on. Clammy, yes, and damp and chill. But still I

pressed on, for a soldier's lot is not to complain, merely to take the objective. I pushed forward, fainted back, made march and counter-march until the enemy's strength was exhausted. And when I quit the field that night, I knew I had seized a great victory. My friend Voltaire said, 'Sir, I think you have impregnated her.' And by God, I hoped it was true, for I would not sally forth again. I should not have hoped."

Frederick turned around and looked again at his son's prone form.

"Indeed, I should not have hoped! For what knows he of sacrifice?!" shouted Frederick. He spit on him and frowned. "Forgive me, there appears to be a mess now."

Frederick scowled and walked off. On his way out, he grabbed Eugene's ass and winked.

Elsa got up. She looked around.

"Yeah, that guy?" said Elsa, pointing at Frederick. "Punzie, his dad forced him to watch while his best friend was executed. Asked him like two hundred questions or something. Just thought I'd give a little context. I'm kind of the exposition fairy, sprinkling explanations over everything."

Rapunzel nodded. Her phone started ringing. Rapunzel looked down at her pocket.

"Hold on, I have to take this," said Rapunzel, leaving the room again. She coughed.

She stepped out into the cool night air, the black Star of Hatred gazing down from the abyssal night sky.

"Uh huh. Yeah. Uh huh. Did you try bribing the ringleaders yet? Oh. Ahhh. I see. Well then. You should go visit Two Fingers. Yeah. Yeah. He'll sort you out. I'll go ahead and authorize Room 202. They should talk once we start breaking limbs. Did you like the gift I sent you? What? Why would you say that? You're important, of course I

wouldn't forget. Yeah. Yeah... You just need to get back up and try again. Plenty of fish in the sea. Don't worry, you're a real catch, anyone would be lucky to have you. Alright. Okay. Anything else? Wait. Wait. I almost forgot. When you stop by the Walmart, could you get Two Fingers the special candy? Make sure it's in the purple wrapping, not the blue. He has allergies. He'll appreciate it. He works hard, and he really deserves some love for that. Alright. I'll catch you later."

Rapunzel hung up. She looked up at the Star of Hatred blazing up ahead. She idly checked the guest list. She frowned.

"Boo!"

Rapunzel's eyes widened and she jumped up. She turned around and came face-to-face with Gothel.

"Moth-el! Gothel. Gothel," said Rapunzel. She straightened up and tried her best to look dignified. "I am very pleased you could make it."

"I'm very pleased I could make it too. I mean, just look... at... this... mess. Goodness, what would you do without me? Look at those curtains! Darling, they don't even match. And this disgusting little rag under us? Really?" said Gothel.

"... i-it was a gift from the Prince of Cochin in Kerala," said Rapunzel.

"Bless you," said Gothel. "Heavens, you can't even keep warm, even in a climate like this. You've caught cold. Luckily, I'm here for you. Mommy can take of you."

Rapunzel pulled back. She stamped her foot down and crossed her arms.

"Don't you underestimate me! I've done things! Bad things! Really, really mean things! I'm a big ol' meanie face and I will make you sad! I've had families killed in front of fathers. All of Europe knelt before

me and existed for my whims! At my beck and call was the strongest army in the world. My empire had an inescapable reach. My conquests would make any Caesar blush!" ranted Rapunzel.

Gothel leaned in and poked Rapunzel's nose with her finger.

"Boop. You're so adorable when you try to be menacing," said Gothel.

Rapunzel swatted Gothel's arm away.

"No! Stop that! I'm not adorable, I'm scary ! Grrr. Grrr! Grrrrr! Come on! I'm important! I'm important..." said Rapunzel.

"You're still mommy's little girl," said Gothel.

"Well then! If that? How's that?! Ha! Haahaha! Then why?!" shouted Rapunzel.

"Oh honey, you're doing that again. The incoherent ranting. I thought we fixed that. Of course, you always did pick up on your words slowly... a bit of a problem child, honestly," said Gothel sweetly.

"WHERE. IS. MY. SON?" screamed Rapunzel.

Gothel was quiet.

"I'm a terrible mother. Where did I go wrong? I don't know why I went wrong. Oh gosh... I just... I can't... I... but," stammered Rapunzel. She wiped tears from her eyes.

"I know why! And I'm lying to myself! Why am I so awful? I shouldn't have coddled him so much. Sent him out to war, maybe. Put him in charge of a province, perhaps have him do a little intelligence. Anything, anything! But I held him so tight. Mother, I didn't want to let go," said Rapunzel.

"He was still your little boy," said Gothel.

"I was weak, so weak," said Rapunzel.

Gothel pulled Rapunzel into her arms and held her tight. She hushed Rapunzel and began to sing.

"Mother knows best, but one day they're going to leave you, and worrying won't change their minds!"

"But they're so naïve! What if they're not ready? All I want is some more time."

"Even if you get it, even if you hold on, some day soon you must let go."

"And I guess I know it, but tell me something Mother..." "-What?"

"Tell me why it hurts me so?"

"Because mother knows best, mother really loves you, and mother needs you to survive.

Mother's always watching, mother fidgets and frets so, mother can't bear to see you cry.

But mother's growing old. Mothers aren't forever. Mother really must depart

Even if they mess up, even if they fall some,

your children... know... best."

Rapunzel paused.

"Or you could just lock them up in a secret dungeon," said Gothel.

"Or I could lock him up in a secret dungeon. But it's way too late for that," said Rapunzel. She sighed.

Then she blinked a few times. "And that's bad! Can't do that. I would never do that. Never ever. Never ever ever. Wouldn't. Shouldn't. It's horrible. No can do, sir, no thinky doey. Nope. No. Nope."

Kristoff sniffed his hand. Silently, he plunged his finger into his nose, pulled a few boogers free, and put them into his mouth. He chewed.

"Hey there Beefcakes."

Kristoff looked up. Standing before him was some sort of sleazy looking salesman. Probably a gay one too.

"Excuse me?" said Kristoff.

"You're excused," said the slimeball. He had a very punchable face.

Kristoff squirmed in his seat. He groaned.

"Could you please leave? I don't talk to asshole strangers," said Kristoff.

Eugene blinked.

"You really don't know who I am?" asked Eugene.

"No. Now leave," said Kristoff.

"Come on. Really? Flynn Rider. You've never heard of Flynn Rider. THE... Flynn Rider. Yes, the Flynn Rider on the front of the box."

"Nope."

"There's been books written about me. Five. Operas. Twelve. My story's been adapted into countless movies and television shows. I'm kinda a big deal, y'know."

"Don't care."

"Are you sure you don't recognize me? I mean, really, really sure. It might be the nose. Try to imagine me with a slightly less majestic, but still very handsome, nose. Can you do that? Is the mental image clicking any better for you?"

"It's not. Leave me alone."

"There's money with my face on it. My story is a national epic. Are you sure you haven't read it? It's this captivating tale of a young, handsome, smart, daredevil, seductive, acrobatic, charming thief who wins the heart of a beautiful princess and the fortunes of the entire realm. It's a literary classic, actually. A masterpiece. A tour de force. A tour de France, even."

"I don't read pulp," said Kristoff.

"Pulp?!" said Eugene indignantly. "Excuse me, the Epic of Flynn Rider: Strongest Fastest Most Awesomest Rogue in the Land is not pulp. Do you know the first song every young Coronan lad learns? It's Deutschlandlied. At least, it used to be, I'm not sure about nowadays. But the first one they learn and actually remember because it's not a boring piece of shit? The Ballad of Flynn Rider!" said Eugene, beaming. After a moment, he pointed to himself and said, "That's me, by the way. In case you hadn't picked up on that."

"Alright, I especially don't read ridiculous propaganda pulp," said Kristoff.

"I didn't want to have to do this, but you seem like a slow learner so... I'm your wife's cousin's husband. So indirectly, we're almost wiener cousins. And we're definitely some kind of family, though the jury is still out on what kind exactly," said Eugene.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not stupid, despite what everyone assumes about the big fucking Sami guy in the corner. But I still don't know you, and I don't care to. Why should I get to know some pompous, greedy, blustering, pretty-boy, sleazy, fly-by-night aristocratic fuck?" said Kristoff.

"Aristocratic? Excuse me, I'm as common as grass. Who do you take me for?" says Eugene.

"Someone who's way too comfortable with this kind of life!" said Kristoff, flipping the table.

Both Kristoff and Eugene looked at the flipped table.

"You just flipped that table," said Eugene.

"... Yeah," said Kristoff.

"Man, you sound you like some issues to work out. Want to talk it out? Not a lot of people know this, because not a lot of people read Flynn Rider the Comic #723 (I will admit that it was running out of steam by then), but I am a trained marriage counselor. I also have several other completely legitimate degrees which I have earned in accredited institutions which may or may not exist in international waters."

"It's just... royals. Royals, man. Why does everything have to be so complicated? Life with trolls was so simple. You got your fire crystals, spirits to appease, ice to harvest. Everything has a clear cause and a clear effect. If you're stupid, you get fucked up. If someone's a jerk, you fuck them up a little. You know what I wonder? I wonder how anyone can be **so** evil and still live with themselves. I wonder why I put up with this shit. I wonder why I don't ever stand up for myself. I wonder a lot of stuff and I still put it with it. Maybe I don't want to live for other people all the time. Maybe I want to go into the middle of the woods and harvest ice until I'm richer than Midas."

"Hold on, this is a lot of stuff to keep straight. So you want to protect people against all that evil but also you want to go into the wilderness and just work forever for money? I'm getting mixed messages here. Can we start again?" asked Eugene.

"I can't keep it straight myself," said Kristoff. "It's just so remorseless, all of it."

"Well," said Eugene slowly. "... Well... I don't know about Anna, but Rapunzel? Every night, she comes back and she tells me everything she did that day. No, hold on. Hear me out. Sometimes she says she made a mistake. And these mistakes, they hurt people. You know what I think? I think it takes a lot of mental fortitude and courage to keep going after that. She keeps smiling. Sometimes she cries, but she gets back up again and goes for another round. And sometimes... sometimes she doesn't sleep at all. I find her in the study, looking out at the dawn. 'Night always ends,' she says. It's... uhh... something. You have to be there, probably."

"Then why do so much evil? What is the point of it all?" asked Kristoff.

"She who fights monsters must take care, lest she become a monster. When you stare into the abyss, the abyss also stares back into you. You know who said that? One of the Jonas Brothers. Jonas Locke, I think."

"It isn't all bad, and you're right but..."

"But what?"

"I guess I'm angry at myself. Doing the thing that movie things do. That thing."

"Screening?"

"I don't think that was it?"

"Filming."

"No, that doesn't sound right."

"Projecting!"

"Projecting! That's right, I'm projecting," said Kristoff, beaming.

"I don't think it's so bad to be happy when you don't think you should be happy," said Eugene.

"And to be honest... I don't know what she sees in me. I keep going on these crazy adventures with her, and I'm so... ordinary. It's strange."

"You're always there for me when I need it. What more could I ask for? What more could I need? It's far more than I deserve," said Anna.

She was standing in the doorway.

"How... long were you standing there?" asked Eugene.

"The whole time, more or less," said Anna, as she walked towards Kristoff.

She kissed him on the forehead. She pulled him to his feet.

They kissed again, deeply.

"My work here as a totally certified marriage counselor is done," said Eugene.

The party was winding down.

"Did everyone have a good time?" asked Rapunzel.

"It was alright," said Elsa, shrugging.

"I look forward to another year with all of you, I really and sincerely do," said Rapunzel.

"Eh. Sometimes I feel like I learn the same lessons over and over and never make any progress. More knowledgeable, but never any wiser.

"A dead dog can't learn any new tricks," said Rapunzel with a tinge of sadness to her voice.

She turned her back to the guests. She cupped her hands. In them was a small golden glow. A ethereal hourglass was sitting within, humming softly. Grains of sand were slowly trickling upwards, back to the top.

A woman, the most powerful in the world, one who would make titans kneel and split the skies, standing before a golden gate. A young girl, scared and confused, with a golden key in hand. She unlocks the door. A laughing devil, willing to take almost any petty gift in exchange for the key. She shields her eyes, afraid. Inside is a pure and infinite whiteness. She steps forward.

What is it?

Hell, more or less. Hell at its purest.

The figure is not one she is expecting.

Expecting something better, perhaps. Or worse?

Just different.

That's what they all say.

I thought it would be darker, somehow.

Why?

Well...

The jail is ultimately a reflection of the prisoner it holds. For the brutish, a steel trap that will admit no mockery of its security. For the false, all sorts of false comforts. And for you?

Am I a prisoner now?

You were always a prisoner. And always free, too. Man is free at the moment he chooses to be.

Is this freedom? It doesn't look like freedom.

It is what you make of it.

Who are you?

Who are you?

A bad person, I guess. I am in Hell after all.

I don't think so.

Don't think I'm a bad person or that I'm in Hell?

I don't think either of those things. What is Hell anyways?

A pit in the ground full of fire?

Of course. But also a state of mind. What is Hell? To be shut off from God forever. But what is God? Is God not the personal God within your heart? God is love.

I don't think I understand.

The difference between Heaven and Hell is love, isn't it? To bring a person face-to-face with others, all of them unchanging, forever.

Hell is other people?

And Heaven too.

Why me?

Do you think anyone asked a devil why he tortured before?

Yes...?

Not like you did.

What now?

I should be asking you that.

I am the prisoner now, right?

Yes. You are finally free.

What about everyone else?

What about them? They are shaped in the image of God, are they not?

I'm... Satan now? I am the Adversary.

That's right. Adversity builds character.

Why is this place so evil?

Why is any place so evil? People wonder how God can always be good. If God is good, why do some things appear evil? And if God's will defines good, then what makes it any way useful or coherent to man? But the answer is simple, isn't it? If God exercises His free will to always do good, then is he not always good while keeping good as a separate concept?

But it's so hard to do good. It's so hard even to know what good is.

It is. It is impossibly hard.

You would have to be...

Perfect.

And that's...

They are shaped in the image of God, are they not?

How?

Shepard them. Be the lion giving the gazelle its speed. You are the wolf watching the sheepdog now.

I don't even know how to help myself.

You have an eternity to learn.

But will it help?

You are shaped in the image of God, are you not?

So... perfect then.

With the potential to be. Care for them. Drive them forward.

And if I fail?

You have an eternity to try. So do they. Perfection is unattainable.

But I must have it.

Correct.

I think I understand how Satan felt now.

All he wanted was to be perfect, like God. But you must be perfect to be perfect.

Isn't that obvious?

It is much less obvious than you think. There are infinitely many wrong paths. Only one right one. To be perfect is to nullify one's free will without losing it. To sacrifice one's will for all eternity. It is hard. But it is not a blameworthy desire, to want to be perfect. All Men dream of it. The first sin, but in a way, the first virtue as well. Who does not want to do good? To bite of the fruit and to know good and evil is to know that one must always seek good. And to seek

good always, that is the first sin. But it is a sin that has been paid for in full. In blood.

And so... I am the prisoner?

I am the prisoner too.

I don't know if I want this... but...

But?

But I can't just leave all these people here. They're suffering. How can I just watch as they're hurt? I can't just walk free while all these people are tormented.

You will place the burdens of the first sin upon yourself again, and knowingly. There will be no second redemption.

It's worth it. If I improve just one life...

Good. You are the prisoner. Seek perfection. Trying is the first step.

I am the prisoner.

Remember, you are free at the moment you choose to be.

But I will not free myself. I prostrate my will before God.

Lucifer. It means morning star. Your star dawns now, my little ray of sunshine. And if you fall? No fall lasts forever if you pick yourself back up.

Rapunzel emerged, a look of perfect contentment on her face.

Life may be an kaleidoscope of purpose, but only one remained for her.

To do good.

Author Notes: i am spreading heresy on christmas lol

I sit here, in a Vegas hotel room, just as I did a year before. I look upon my work and realize it is almost Gnostic in its implications, a fact which is less than pleasing to me, as Gnosticism is one of my less favorite Platonic offshoots, to put it lightly. It had gotten away from me. And to be honest, it was not the first time. This whole fanfic has really gotten away from me, but I can't really be upset at it. I typically don't like Author Notes. It seems almost self-indulgent to write them. If the fic does not stand without them, then it should be changed until it does. And it adds another messy level of association between the author and the work. While I play around with many things in the fic, by no means does this constitute some kind of manifesto, and it would be stupid of me to write one like this. While I display a rather romantic view of monarchy, with melodramatic rulers agonizing over their hard choices, in reality, many rulers were bland mediocrities (though I have a soft spot for Nicky, such a poor man. In *lotR*, he is a rather more jolly figure, the man I think he could have been with a bit less responsibility and a bit more care. Still dominated by his wife, of course, but able to live as he ought. Perhaps starring in some demented parallel universe version of *The Simpsons*. I think it would work), more at home as Walmart Greeters. But, perhaps we should remember (and repurpose) Moltke's words. "In war with its enormous friction, even the mediocre is quite an achievement." In statecraft too, this must be true. Still, I would not describe myself as a monarchist. Nor a revanchist or many other views expressed within, even by the narrator (a rather stereotypical /int/olerant, minus the dank memes, which, unfortunately, I have found do not translate terribly well, a board near and dear to my heart, but a bit much at times.) So why am I leaving such long notes then?

I suppose I am rather awestruck at how long I've been doing this. And I really must thank you all. Even if you haven't enjoyed it, thank you for taking the time to get this far anyways. One says that an author must write for themselves, and while I've grown to appreciate that advice more, nevertheless, if I didn't care about others reading, I

would never publish (even if it is only on). So let me be sincere for just a brief moment. Thank you.

I look forward to another year with all of you, I really and sincerely do. Merry Christmas.

...

:DDDDDD

also this is part one of two part thing, could not finish before chrstmas lol

Religion II

"A Honved infantryman from 16th Regiment had been shot straight across the face. Both eyes had been lost. I took the poor, helpless man by the hand, and tried to find words of comfort. He replied briefly and from the heart: 'Haza ert!'-For the Fatherland!" - General Moritz von Auffenberg

"Again, he deprives the guardians even of happiness... and if the guardians are not happy, who are?" - Aristotle

"I don't think there's any redemption at the end of this road. But it doesn't matter, so long as we're together." - Anna

Eugene grimaced. His plate was practically untouched.

"Something wrong?" asked Elsa.

"No, nothing's wrong," said Eugene.

"You aren't eating," said Elsa.

"I'm full already," said Eugene.

"Aha! Caught you! I saw you stuffing snacks in your mouth earlier," said Elsa, crossing her arms.

"Maybe he just doesn't like the meal?" said Anna.

"Nonsense. Rapunzel makes sure the cooks always prepare food he likes.

Frederick swallowed another bite of gelato. He idly raised a hand to greet Rapunzel. "How is my darling little sunbeam doing today?" asked Frederick.

Rapunzel smiled and sat down. "Wonderful, grandpa. I ha-" said Rapunzel.

"Delightful. Nothing pleases me more than to see my granddaughter happy. You really turned out right, and I suppose that's because your 'father' didn't raise you. Your mother is a splendid lady, one of those few women that has a head on their shoulders. It is always a pity that such an aesthetically pleasing gender should be so utterly devoid of higher virtue and value. Not that many men are much better. It is a rather revolting and disgusting scene to watch a typical toybox court and its little wind-up royals, all chittering and chattering with their animal friends like their lives are half-damned Disney animated films, not realizing what lies at stake all around them. Imagine looking at a young Austrian princess, her eyes full of sparkling tears as she moans about the tragedy of the whole affair she herself constructed. She is ever so eager to return to her gilded court, where all the little woodland creatures will flatter her and sooth her conscious, where all the nobles will assure her that she is the paragon of goodness and purity she hopes to be, and where the Virgin Mary will smile and bless her reign. All of these cowards, of course, afraid to say that the Empress has no clothes, afraid to speak the truth: the more she cries, the more she takes. This, dear Rapunzel, is why God gave us a gag reflex."

Rapunzel shrank back a bit. "Urm... I was in a Disney movie," said Rapunzel.

"Darling, don't be gauche. Your Disney movie was far more charming than the typical saccharine diabetic fare. No cast of oh-so-cute-you-could-squeeze-them-until-their-heads-pop animals, just a chameleon and horse. The chameleon is naturally a very noble creature, able to adapt to any challenges thrown at it. It just has to change its true colors for that, and really, don't we all? Looking at a map of the old Germany makes me want to bulldoze all the Ruritania's so I can replace them with empty parking lots. Perhaps I should have been born later. I would've been able to ride by handsome Napoleon as he tore through Germany and Austria." He grinned.

Frederick stood up. "I'm sorry, but I have a call to make. I know, I know, he never picks up, but persistence is a virtue," said Frederick.

Rapunzel poked the gelato in front of her with a spoon. She frowned.

"You can't let this go on forever," said Bismarck, walking in.

"Let what go on forever?" asked Rapunzel.

"Don't be so coy; it's quite unbecoming. Your grandfather wanders the palace, harassing people. He's trying to make the servants speak French, and he's squeezed your husband's ass several times now. Our dear king is rather uncomfortable with this," said Bismarck.

"I'm glad Grandpa approves of my husband," said Rapunzel.

"Who's in charge here, you or him?" asked Bismarck.

"Even if I wanted to do something, what could I do? Do you have a plan?" asked Rapunzel.

Bismarck chuckled. "Your Majesty, I always have a plan," he said, holding up a copy of *The Parent Trap*.

Few knew the forces they were unleashing by dismantling the Ottoman Empire. Despite troubles in the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire had managed to hold all of its territory until the outbreak of the Great War, despite interference from foreign powers and Russian pressures. Ottoman control was tightest in the imperial core, in the Balkans and Anatolia, the lands which the Byzantine Empire had always held tight, the lands first conquered by the House of Osman. Here, the power of the Sultan was unquestionable. Traditionally, Christian subjects of the Sultan were expected to pay a special tax, the *jizya*. In exchange, they were exempted from military service. In a series of reforms made in the late 19th century, the *jizya* was abolished and Christians forced into military service. The Ottoman Empire thus greatly increased its pool of manpower. This gave it a

much greater estimate of its own strength, causing it to throw its lot decisively in with its Austrian allies instead of holding back at first. However, this strength was deceptive. Secret societies were widespread in the pre-war Ottoman Empire, and much of the communications infrastructure of the military was controlled by either Young Turks or Balkan separatists. While the various minorities of Austro-Germany rallied around the monarchy immediately after war broke out, the minority groups of the Ottoman Empire instead saw an opportunity to break free. Order began to disintegrate across the Empire. The Young Turk revolution was successful, but what it inherited was more or less a mess.

The 19th century tension between conservative multiculturalism and liberal nationalism was finally coming to a head, with explosive results. Entire regiments were defecting to join local groups of Balkan rebels. The Austro-German project was finally collapsing. One could say it was doomed from the start. After all, it was simultaneously trying to merge liberal ideals with the old traditional multiculturalism of the Hapsburg lands. It would take a truly great leader to manage the synthesis of these concepts, both deeply at odds with each other, and Austro-Germany lacked such a figure. And even if it did, that would require a man with absolute mastery of pragmatic realpolitik, a sort of man you'd be hard-pressed to find in honorable-to-a-fault Austria, a place where spies were forbidden to use sexual blackmail, as it was too dishonorable. The dismantling of the Austro-German and Ottoman Empires unleashed bubbling nationalist forces which had been left to simmer for far too long. The multiculturalism of the conservative empires had allowed for different groups to mix and spread. As such, Croats lived side-by-side with Serbs, Bosnians, Turks, Greeks, and Bulgarians. There was peace. It was a peace maintained in a peculiar way.

More or less, it could be described as separate but equal. Christians, Muslims, and Jews had separate courts and law codes. When it was advantageous to them, people of other religions could appeal to Muslim courts. Similarly, the influence of religious authorities in government prevented too much oppression from the Muslim

minority ruling class. Ottoman power was always strongest in the imperial core, the Balkan and Anatolian territories which had been the stronghold of the Byzantine empire which had preceded it. In much of the empire, rule was still done by local aristocrats, ones that had remained in power for centuries. These local notables competed with each other to secure tax farming contracts from the central bureaucracy, contracts which they could abuse to empower their own families in a never-ending battle for dominance. Too often, they ignored the summons of the Sultan and his demands for soldiers and gold. This played out most amusingly in the Napoleonic Wars, with many nobles refusing to budge against the army right on their doorstep. Many reforms would thus be made to reduce the power of these little nobles and their struggling against the vast apparatus of state.

When Austro-Germany tried to solve its own minority problem, it looked to the Ottoman Empire for inspiration. Prior to the reorganization of the empire, the Hungarians had been the chief military enforcers of imperial coherence. Austrian rulers had to, time and time again, prostrate themselves before Hungarian nobles to obtain men and money. With the Austro-German reforms, this changed. Hungary instead became one of the three key administrative regions of the empire. However, minorities were provided with their own special form of representation in addition to their right to vote for Imperial Diet representatives. In typical Austrian fashion, an old but honorable title was resurrected for a new structure of government. Designated minorities voted for Imperial Knights, who in turn selected Imperial Directors from their number. These Imperial Knights each represented a township, and the men they designated as Directors reported directly to the Emperor rather than to the Imperial Diet or to provincial governors. It was hoped that this would be a check on potential racist abuses and ethnic violence. Although the institution of Imperial Knighthood was initially restricted to men, in 1878, Karolina Svetla, a nationalist and female writer in the Austro-German empire, stood for election and won a position as an Imperial Knight. She soon won the confidence of her fellow Knights, becoming the Director for the district of Moravia. There, she

used her position to bring the issue of Czech female education straight to the Emperor's doorstep. After it was approved by the Emperor and his ministers, her proposal went to the Imperial Diet, and after hearty debates in the Diet, an alliance between Nationalist and Feminist parties pushed the issue through. The Young Czech party proclaimed victory and immediately pushed through another bill authorizing a national day of celebration. Dukes put on their Sunday best and soldiers paraded in perfectly smart uniforms as Emperor Franz Joseph delivered a speech written for him by the governor of the March of Lusatia, one praising the day as a victory for the Austro-German people and for Franz Joseph's mythic ancestor (who was not the direct heir, but had managed to slip back in the family line through inbreeding), Snow White, who had been denied opportunities by her wicked stepmother. Thanks to the creation of the Maria Theresa Imperial Education Fund for Women, every woman would now have the same educational opportunities as a noblewoman. Buoyed by success, nationalist and feminist movements grew even stronger.

Franz Ferdinand attempted to defuse nationalist sentiment during his brief tenure as Emperor, and perhaps would have been more successful had he cooperated with the Hungarians. That being said, even with the empire in decay politically, it was still not mortally wounded. The Hapsburg domains had suffered many lows and rebounded successfully. Hundreds of years of experience had given the family many tools suited to keeping disparate people together and productive. The family had come a long way from its first few quiet utterances of "AEIOU". The same was true of the Ottoman Empire. Its apparatuses of rule had been refined over many centuries, facing constant new challenges and the ever-present dangers of decentralized government. While neither was the most efficient, they kept the peace in a naturally chaotic world.

In the blink of an eye, they both came crashing down.

The order so carefully constructed over generations of Hapsburgs disintegrated in an instant. In Romania, Hungarians were dragged

out of their homes and beaten by angry mobs chanting "Go back to Asia!" Crowds gathered in German cities shouting "Hep! Hep! Slaughter all Jews!", hep standing for 'Hierosolyma est perdita'- Jerusalem is lost. Street fights occurred throughout the former empire. The Allies had opted to remove all German territory from Austria and Corona, forming a new Germany out of it. Austria and Corona were both reduced to rump states, Austria becoming a strange chicken leg to the south of Germany, Corona a small "Federal Republic" comprised of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, and small pieces of Pomerania, plus the city of Danzig. While Germany had been devastated, the citizens of what was now Poland did not see the Great War sweep onto their homes. This would have devastating results in the future.

In the Balkans, results were even worse. Peoples had moved about since time immemorial, and in the Balkans, ethnicity was more of a statement about religion than any real expression of blood. Converts to Islam "turned Turk" or became Bosnians, depending on the region. One valley might be settled by Serbs, and the next one over by Croats. This was utterly anathema to the orderly nation-states the West wanted to impose. The borders could only be made clean through ethnic cleansing and warfare. Pregnant women were bayoneted before the corpses were gang raped. Children were set on fire and left to burn. Human decency had dissolved as quickly as the old borders. Wilson, an American professor, harshly criticized the American government for cooperating with the European powers in setting terms. He claimed that an international council of nations would have dictated more fair surrenders and would have mediated disputes between newly formed countries more fairly. In the coming years, as Fascism rose across the continent, many would come to agree with Wilson. These sentiments would culminate in the founding of the United Nations after the Second World War.

The Ottoman Empire was fatally damaged by the mass desertions of Balkan soldiers. Long ago, the Ottoman Empire had relied on Greek diplomats, only to be betrayed in a moment of weakness. The Sultan had remembered this, but the Grand Vizier assured him that they

lived in an enlightened new age, one where ethnic tensions and old hatreds would soon be forgotten. Before the war was over, the Sultan would be deposed in a palace coup by the Young Turks. Greece attempted to seize Constantinople, and though the Ottoman Empire had disintegrated, enough Turkish soldiers remained to fight. The Turkish National Assembly unanimously voted absolute power onto a Young Turk captain: Ataturk. The British and Greeks were forced back, and after tense negotiations, during which Turkish soldiers held their rifles with stocks facing out, to show their peaceful intentions, the final borders of the Republic of Turkey were fixed, and plans to award Constantinople to the Greeks and eastern Anatolia to Kurds and Armenians abandoned. At any rate, the Young Turks had committed genocide against the Armenians and purged the army of Arabs, fearing disloyalty and further outbreaks of rebellion.

The situation was worst of all in the Arab lands. The British had sponsored Hussein bin Ali, but Hussein was a moderate Muslim, and his rebellion against the Ottoman Empire only raised a few thousand troops and did little to impact the outcome of the war, sensational stories of Lawrence of Arabia aside.

Symbols live strange lives. A symbol of luck becomes a symbol of tyranny. A Tengri star and crescent arranged in a way traditional to Constantinople, the City of the World's Desire, and the bulwark of Christendom against Islam, ends up representing Islam. For centuries, the Ottoman Sultan had also been Caliph, the leader of the Muslim world. His task was to bring Islam to the world through the sword, and in doing so, place the entire world under the House of Islam: the House of Peace. Of course, such a task did not last long. Early Ottoman armies were heavily Greek, many finding joining the invaders more pleasant than starvation, Byzantine infrastructure long having collapsed. The Turks had been tolerant since Izzuddin II of the Seljuks, son of a Greek woman, and rumored crypto-Christian. It was a legacy that would endure long after his name had become obscure. Perhaps such was an inevitability. Christian slaves found their way into Turkish harems, where they would mother new

Sultans. As the old proverb went: "Closeness to mother is closeness to God."

Greek advisors dominated the early Ottoman courts, and the Turks were receptive to their efforts. The Turks had been comparatively primitive when they emerged from the steppes, absorbing any influences they encountered like sponges. First came the Persians, but the influence of the dying Byzantine Empire went deepest. From these Greek seeds grew a new civilization. It would be one strong enough to finally tame the shifting sands.

Tame, but not fully master. Only with a light hand could the Middle East be kept in check. While fiefs gave way to direct Ottoman control through much of the Balkans and Anatolia, the Middle East remained the plaything of local aristocrats. When the British seized the Middle East, they thought they were taking rational, well-ordered land that could be traded and divided as easily as any European territory. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

"Well, it's about your sister," began Kristoff, before he stopped himself. His wife, not her sister.

Elsa didn't even turn around. She continued flipping through a long and picture-less report, occasionally stopping to make a little note in blue ink. "What, are the crocodiles loose again?" asked Elsa.

"Excuse me?" asked Kristoff.

Elsa looked up. She gave Kristoff a quizzical look. "The crocodiles, Kristoff. The ones she's been training to 'dismantle the cis-patriarchal quasi-socialist corporatist fascist regime discombobulating all the good vibrations in the crystal matrix fourth-dimensional time cuboid', whatever that means? I really can't believe she's kept them this long. Usually her projects fail spectacularly by now," said Elsa.

She frowned.

"Not that I'm wishing she'd fail or anything," said Elsa, "it's really great when she succeeds. But she usually fails, but that doesn't mean I should assume failure every time. That would be horrid and that would make me a horrid person. Who am I even kidding, everyone knows I'm a monster. Whatever."

Elsa checked a box reading "Imprison". She hummed the last few measures of "Marche triomphale du diable".

"I'm jealous, Kristoff. You get to be a good person and I don't. It must feel good to sleep soundly at night. It sucks when you're the fly in every soup, the pebble in every shoe, the pea beneath every bed, et cetera. It's not so easy being evil," said Elsa. She waved at a crowd. They cheered. She went back to reading her reports.

Kristoff noticed that all of the members of the crowd were wearing identical shirts, black things with #TheOnceAndFutureQueen written on them. One of them ran up to Elsa holding out a copy of *Elsa: Queen, Sister, Conqueror: The Life of Arendelle's Greatest Monarch*. Without losing a beat or even looking away from her reports, Elsa signed the book.

"I just noticed I've been completely ignoring your... whatever-it-is... to rant about my own problems. Yet another reason I'm the worst person ever. So what's going on? Anna pregnant again? That'll be... twelve now? Wait, no, that can't be it. You can't get pregnant in Hell. Did she accidentally break all of your bones? It's not the crocodiles. Did she set all of our furniture on fire? This one time, I came home and saw her huddled up by a bonfire containing all of our chairs. Kept muttering something about Desjardin not making it back. I should just ask you, huh? It would be so much easier if I just talked to people instead of assuming. I guess I don't do easy. That's not the point! What's your problem, Kristoff?" asked Elsa.

"I think my marriage is running into problems," said Kristoff.

"Really? Anna hasn't said anything about that. I thought I remembered you talking to a marriage counselor before I woke up in

a bathtub next to a carp," said Elsa.

"Eugene isn't a real marriage counselor," said Kristoff.

"Then why does he have such nice business cards?" asked Elsa. She handed Kristoff a card.

"It doesn't really matter," said Kristoff as he scanned the card. The address seemed odd for some reason.

"I think it does. We're here, Kristoff," said Elsa. "Where did you think we were walking?"

Kristoff checked the business card again and squinted. He scratched his head and sniffed the air.

They were in front of an In-n-Out.

"What am I supposed to be seeing here?" asked Kristoff.

"The office of your counselor," said Elsa.

"A terrible fast food joint?" asked Kristoff.

"It's not terrible," said Elsa, "and I think this will be good for you. I've got to go. Take care, Chris."

Kristoff stood there, mute for a moment. Then he shouted back, "It's Kristoff!"

He grumbled. He walked into the In-n-Out. A blonde woman was tapping her fingers on the counter top in front of her cash register. Families were eating burgers together.

A line of thirty women was formed outside the Men's Bathroom. A thin, stick-like butler craned his head out of the bathroom door. He sneered as he spotted Kristoff. He extended his spindly legs and slithered into the hallway, the little tails of his tuxedo flapping a bit.

He bowed deeply to Kristoff, his thin but long nose almost touching his kneecaps.

"Mister Anna? The master has been expecting you, monsieur," said the man.

"The name's Kristoff," said Kristoff.

The man scoffed. Kristoff resisted the urge to punch him.

Kristoff walked into the bathroom.

"Kristopher, I've been wanting to see you," said Eugene.

"It's Kristoff," said Kristoff.

"Right, like I'd forget your name so quickly," said Eugene, rolling his eyes.

"Listen, I'm only here because my wife's sister insisted," said Kristoff.

"So..." said Eugene. Thoughts raced through his head. He didn't look like the kind of guy who would buy fake Rolexes, nor the sort that placed bets on horses. He probably did his own plumbing too. He wasn't wearing anything that needed dry cleaning, nor did he have a bag full of clothes. He might've been the kind of man to enjoy Flynn Rider's Simulated Phone Sex Line, being rather bearish. But he did mention wife. It was probably marriage counseling.

"Marriage counseling! You've come to the best in the business," said Eugene.

"Of course I have," said Kristoff.

"Listen, all you need to do is read Flynn Rider: The Collected Annotated Adventures: Commentary by Hegel to her before offering to roleplay Flynn Rider. No lady can resist the charms of such a dashing, handsome, intelligent, well-dressed rogue. While you're wearing an official Flynn Rider Costume Play Set from Flynnco, you

are Flynn Rider! You're a lady killer! Works every time or your money back."

Kristoff gave Flynn a look before storming out of the restroom.

He sighed and buried his face in his hands. He quickly composed himself. He looked at the front. The restaurant was packed with people, all sorts of people with red trays loaded with hamburgers. His stomach grumbled. Kristoff walked to the nearest line. He let himself zone out.

He snapped out of his trance fifteen minutes later. It had taken fifteen minutes for him to reach the front of the line. He approached the cashier, a young blonde woman. She blathered on and on.

So much so that he slipped into a trance. Again. It had been happening more and more as of late.

He got his burger, sleepwalking to a table. He blinked and noticed he had finished. He walked outside and stared at the sun.

"What is death, really?" asked Elsa. "To be forgotten? To give up? A long sleep, perhaps? Oh, to be one of the souls that tires of life and simply slips away. It would be such an easy thing. Let the centuries pass and awaken whenever something interesting happens. A highlight reel of the universe. So many let themselves surrender to the void. It's pleasant, yes, but... no. Such a surrender is the true death, isn't it? Contenting one's self to let the world pass by? I can't let you do that. I can't let you fade away. She needs you."

Elsa sized up the expressionless man. It was a fate that awaited everyone, one day. No will lasts forever. No one can exert themselves in perpetual self-improvement. Sooner or later, one must say that things are good enough.

And then death. True death. Ah, how sweet it is to sleep. One can always return, one day. Not even death can hold forever. It is just a little death, this true death. A small pleasure for the weary.

"Kristoff. Kristoff, wake up," said Elsa.

"Wha? Did I doze off?" asked Kristoff. "Hey... what's going on?"

"We were going to the bar, Kristoff," said Elsa.

"Oh. We were?" asked Kristoff.

"Yeah. It was just down the street," said Elsa.

"Okay," said Kristoff.

The bar was a bit of tacky faux-Roman pseudo-architecture, a bit of pasty stucco daubed together and glued with cheap paint and bricks, the kind of bourgeois playground that sprang up everywhere, like a giant Las Vegas Eiffel Tower in miniature, a place that stank, quintessentially, with vinegar, and hot wings, and beer, and wispy cigar smoke, and wispier dreams, them most of all.

Wispy dreams most of all, that was the trade of the barman. Not beer or garum, for those things could be had at home. No, it was the most intangible things that were valuable. It was a special place, guarded by taboos, a place by adults for adults. A place of strapping young lads throwing balls, perfectly green grass, dapper coats tickling ivory keys with fine white gloves, and drinks with long names and fine pedigrees. You could look deep into the reflection caught in the golden beer, pregnant with dreams and foamy ambitions, shatter its stillness with a swig, and drink it all away. It was Happy Hour, but, in truth, every hour was a happy hour in that Elysium, that outopos.

Elsa opened the door, and they went inside. 'The Noblest Broman of Them All', that was the name, and a gallery of fine Bromans adorned the walls, the pictures capturing human Adonises, perfectly chiseled by an all-knowing God. Brosef Stylin', Abroham Lincoln, Nabroleon Bronaparte, Teddy Broosevelt, all immortalized in their portraits, a toga exhorting people to "Party Hard" on each one, their serene faces locked in eternal thought, their heads each adorned with the crown of a transportation master, the brim extolling the virtues of "Tig

'Ol Bitties", praised by poets as fine as Ovid, the light of placid sunbeams forever giving them each a gentle golden glow.

Her meditations were interrupted by the call, clarion and clear, of an alarm. Flashing crimson and bright, it illuminated the whole room with its blaring light. Someone had cast the die and crossed the Ribicon. Ten whole maniporks, a whole line, would be ready to meat him. And that meant...

Soon.

"Kristoff, you get us a table," said Elsa, disappearing into the bathroom.

Kristoff complied, finding them a booth.

Nearby, two men talked.

"Well, it's got to be Hemingway, Grant, or the Great Alexander," said Patton, grinning wide.

"And if I drink you under the table?" asked Scipio Africanus, smiling.

"Then you would be the greatest drinker of all," said Patton.

They both downed their shots.

Music came in over the speakers. Elsa burst from the bathroom, wearing a silver crocus-chain over a baggy purple-green hoodie. She peeked over her dollar-sign shaped shutter shades and winked. Then she gave a shit-eating grin, flashing her gold tooth. She tipped her hat, which was purple and had a tiger-print ribbon wrapping around it, a single ostrich feather rising from it like a flag.

She was... magnificent. Yes, that was the only way that sight could be described.

Elsa was as much a Sun King as Louis XV, as great as Peter II of Russia, as virtuous as Maria Theresa of Spain. She swaggered onto

the stage.

"The Magnificent E coming down like a **blizzard**

My flow so magical they think I'm a *wizard*

Step up son, lemme show you how it's done

Born in the north, and I'm groomed to be queen

Queen of the bitches, if you know what I mean

Live to be queen, freeze all the haters

Chop up the bodies and feed them to gators

Drop a dime on the fools and preach to the wicked

That green ho so fly I wish she would lick it

It being my vagina, but really my vulva

The incorrect usage of vocabulary

Is a personal hangup of mine."

Galileo threw a soda cup at Elsa. "You suck," he jeered. Pope Urban VIII tried to shush him. Gregor Mendel gave a supportive thumbs-up from another table, where Paul Kern was playing Back to Bed on his tablet.

"Fuck you Galileo, you're a cocksucker

You only discover stars because you're a dogfucker

Stupid lucker

Noob failure abortion

I fuck your mother!

I'm cool as ice

You're ugly and I bet you smell like feet!"

Elsa dropped the mic. Someone threw a tomato at her. She dodged it.

"Fuck the haters, you can't handle my flow, is all," said Elsa.

She sauntered back to the table. Patty swang on by.

"Oh Elsa, you ol' fox," said Cleopatra, smirking, "what can I get for you two?"

"I'll have a cosmo. And you?" asked Elsa.

"I don't drink," said Kristoff.

"Two cosmos, Patty. It's nice to see you again. How's Markie?" asked Elsa.

"Absolutely delightful, sharp as a gladius, and twice as long if you catch what I'm pitching. Darling?" said Patty.

"Yes?"

"Don't get carried away this time, please. People'll worry. It's good to have a relationship with alcohol, but Heavens to Betsy, don't let it get abusive," said Cleopatra.

"Okay," said Elsa.

Cleopatra smiled and walked off. Marc Antony winked as she approached the counter, and she kissed him on the cheek.

"It's so hard getting people to obey you," said Elsa.

"Why's that? Seems to me people obey way too easily. The world would be better if people showed a little backbone and didn't just follow orders," said Kristoff.

"That's the thing, Kristoff. They don't. You can cajole them, persuade them, even threaten them. But if you tell them they have no choice, they rebel every single time. When push comes to shove, people have a natural instinct to defy authority. The hero is always the brave underdog come to the villain's death fortress, ready to run her through, not realizing that she just wants the best for everybody. Nobody has sympathy for the devil," said Elsa.

"The devil doesn't deserve sympathy. Why should I sympathize with crooks, bastards, and thieves?" asked Kristoff.

Elsa winced.

"Imagine seeing a road and a cliff, Kristoff. You can walk on the road, but it will be rough going. The cliff leads to oblivion. You keep ordering people away from the cliff, and they stick their tongues at you and run right off. You scream at them that they shouldn't, that the cliff brings only misery, and they laugh. You tell them that the cliff leads to damnation, and they say that's just an opinion. You tell them that they have no choice. And time and time again, they say they always have a choice. No matter what you say, nobody stays away from the cliff. They write poetry about the cliff, extol the virtues of the cliff, say that it is becoming and just to jump off the cliff. But the cliff leads to nothing but death. But people, the contrarians they are, distrust authority too much. Everything you do right is part of some vast conspiracy to destroy them. Everything you do wrong is proof of your evil, when in truth, you were just too incompetent. They expect so much, and when you inevitably let them down, they go straight off the cliff. And you reach for them, but you can't catch them. And it's your fault. It was always your fault. Those poor lemmings were your responsibility, and you murdered them," said Elsa.

Cleopatra returned with the drinks. Elsa grabbed a cosmo.

"Perfect timing as always, Patty," said Elsa. Patty nodded and sauntered off.

"So what, we're doomed? Is that the point?" asked Kristoff.

"No. There's a way forward. People don't do the rational thing. A person that hasn't studied economics, philosophy, or government is rarely rational, and a person that has is only inconsistently so. But they'll do anything for love. Love is a force beyond comprehending. If you teach the people love, they will gladly put themselves into chains for you. Early attempts to use love for the state's advantage were crude at best. People love their families, so why not take political prisoners? Well-meaning, but ultimately too clumsy a method. But there are other loves. Teach them to love God, and they will supplicate themselves for the sake of Paradise. Teach them to love themselves, and they will do anything to enrich themselves, and in the process, enrich the state. Teach them to love knowledge, and they will accept anything, no matter how immoral, if it is done in the name of science. Teach them to love other peoples, and they will die in foreign jungles and dusty deserts for a nebulous burden and duty to help them. Teach them to love their monarch, and they will die in droves for the throne. It is so strange to think that there are people who have never met me, who don't even really know me, who would die for me. And this last one is perhaps the most brilliant of all. Teach them to love the state in and of itself. Make them see the state as an extension of themselves. Turn the state into a vessel of the people and their wishes. This, in the end, was Napoleon's greatest achievement. The sheer genius of it cannot possibly be overstated," said Elsa.

"This all sounds like hatred and jack-booted thuggery to me. How can you call something like this love?" asked Kristoff.

"Love and hatred aren't opposites. To love knowledge is to despise ignorance. To love one's nation is to see others as inferior, or at the very least, different. The opposite of love is apathy. Go ahead and find an Average Joe. Rattle off a list of atrocities to him, atrocities happening at that very instant. He'll feel bad-no-not bad. He'll feel

guilty. He'll feel guilty because he doesn't feel bad. To him, those people are just numbers," said Elsa.

She took a sip of her cosmo. The table was silent. Only the television above their heads continued speaking.

Italy scored a goal. The bar broke out in applause. Marc began chanting "Roma Victrix, Roma Invicta!" Elsa rubbed her forehead.

"People reject everything you tell them. They think they're so clever for it, too. But imagine you're Milgram, and the experiment isn't just an experiment, but really must go through. All these variations that present only stubbornness. It's all quite mad, isn't it? All these people think they're so smart for seeing that you're lying. They're so very knowledgeable, aren't they? They see and all the sheeple fucking don't! Well, you know what? Maybe if they marry and reproduce, they'll find they actually enjoy children, and that the love in their marriage will grow over time, if they only give each other a little bit of room to breathe and don't expect perfection. Consume, you fools, or else you'll starve! Conform because you're actually a damnable little gremlin with no redeeming qualities beneath the surface, and even half-hearted propaganda about sharing and accepting others is better than that. Buy, because that money has to find its way to another pocket so they can eat too. Stay asleep. Ask any insomniac what they think about not staying asleep. Ha! They're knowledgeable, but not wise. When I was a little girl, I remember hearing about the death of Joseph II. I asked Father what he did that was so bad. His people all despised him. Father only told me that he tried to give them freedom, and he looked so very sad. I didn't understand then. I do now. People don't want real freedom. Real freedom comes with responsibilities. People want to feel free, but they'll shift the responsibilities onto you, and spit in your face for 'oppressing' them. Do you think bad things happen because of evil people? Let's take the example of government. What happens when government is dissolved? People still need peacekeepers to maintain law and order. At a small scale, one person matters a great deal. But the business of defense is most efficient at a grand scale.

The defenders must be able to field enough to make their conquest unpalatable to their largest neighbors. And once they do that, it is only natural to recoup some of the costs by absorbing your smaller rivals. Thus, states grow larger and larger, and the increased size of rival states make this growth necessary. Once there are sufficiently few states, a balance of power can be brokered between diplomats, but what peace can there be between hundreds or thousands of different interests? How can any arrangement of so many states prove stable? And any state large enough to survive consolidation will find that it is too large for the voice of one man to matter much. Government is a monopoly on force, but it is a natural monopoly. All states competing must have sufficient force to deter their greatest threat, meaning the minimum size is quite large without powerful allies, and those powerful allies themselves only exist because they absorbed their rivals. And having obtained monopoly on force, it is only the natural course of state for the state to become tyrannical, as each step towards security increases stability and decreases the effort of running the government, and people, even rulers, are lazy. In short, the people complaining could do no better, often realize this, and complain anyways. This is the way it has to be, yet they still attack me. Her. Reindeer are better than people. Reindeer never bite the hand that feeds them," said Elsa.

"Well... that's not because they're grateful. Reindeer can't bite at all," said Kristoff.

Elsa nodded slowly.

"I don't know anything about reindeer," said Elsa.

"I'll be honest. All of this sounds like bullcrap," said Kristoff.

"Maybe it is. It's hard to believe in yourself when it feels like the whole world is against you. Maybe I am the bad guy. If I showed my true colors, dropped all of the lies, who would still follow me? Then I remember. Anna. Anna would. She doesn't care that I keep doing all of these awful things. She tells me that she believes in me, even though I feel like everything I do is hurting and corrupting her. But

she tells me that I'm protecting her smile, and the fool I am, I believe her," said Elsa.

"You're telling me that Anna actually understands all of this?" asked Kristoff.

"Maybe? I think she just loves me unconditionally and doesn't realize the implications of what she's talking about. But maybe she does. Maybe she's Joan of Arc, defending me from the wicked English. Maybe I'm Gille de Rais, corrupting pure, innocent Joan. Maybe I'm Joan and she's Gille. Maybe we're both Burgundians, out to burn saintly Joan. Maybe we're English trying to impose our unwanted rule on everything, and they don't appreciate it. And maybe we're both French soldiers off to war, doomed to slog through a conflict that will last beyond our lifetime, and perhaps won't ever truly end. But that's not the point, really. That's why I keep you around, even though you're so dangerous. That... came out wrong."

"Keep me around? Wait, what? I'm dangerous? Excuse me?" asked Kristoff.

"I didn't mean to say that. Can we move on?" said Elsa.

"No, I want to know. Since you're already blathering on, you might as well explain yourself," said Kristoff.

"You're a really good person, Kristoff," said Elsa.

"Thank you?" said Kristoff.

"No, that's dangerous. When people see a good person, they start believing in themselves. They begin to think that all these cruelties and oppressions are unnecessary. They throw off the chains of the tyrants and rule themselves. But most people really aren't that good. They're not evil, no, but they'll put the needs of their friends and family above strangers, even if that's not the best thing to do. People underestimate how much they depend on the kindness of strangers.

Society breaks down. Chaos. Murder. Roving gangs. Ethnic cleansing. Bad stuff."

"So what, you'd get rid of me? I have anti-magic trinkets and I always watch where the guards are going," said Kristoff.

"I know," said Elsa, "but the guards were never the threat."

"You know I always watch the guards and that Pabbie gave me a necklace? What, do you stalk me?"

"No. Gerda does."

"Gerda does," said Kristoff in a flat monotone. "Gerda, your nursemaid and servant. The nice old lady always giving you cookies. That Gerda."

"Yes. Who exactly do you think she is?" asked Elsa.

"An old granny? One with a creepy and strange crush?" asked Kristoff.

"Gerda Tennsfjord. Originally recruited as an informant, she distinguished herself by fingering three ringleaders of a plot to assassinate my father. In addition, she was known to give accurate reports, and did not give false reports to advance her own position or remove people she disliked. From there, she was recruited into Intelligence, where she worked in research intelligence. After five years of this, she was promoted to a policy analyst. Nine years later, she was a senior policy analyst. Shortly after this, she was transferred to our consulate in Corona, ostensibly as a cultural attache. While there, she discovered one of the top members of military intelligence was in the pay of Corona. Because we did not want to disturb good relations with Corona, Gerda assigned a taskforce and told to eliminate the double agent without arousing suspicion, keeping it secret from the public, Arendelle's men, and Corona's men, as well from all other foreign interlopers. She succeeded. My father, who had just, made Gerda the head of the

Secret Police. After that, my powers became more and more of an issue, and she was assigned to watch me. Only people with the utmost loyalty could be trusted around me, and the castle security had to be greatly reduced, since soldiers talk. Father needed someone who could nurse me and protect me. The woman who gave you cookies is Arendelle's spymaster. He chose Gerda," said Elsa.

"Right. And I suppose Kai is some sort of ninja," said Kristoff.

"No, just a particularly obedient and effective bureaucrat. He could be trusted," said Elsa.

"How come I've never seen her do any spy business then?" said Kristoff.

"She's a spymaster, not a spy. Her main tasks are bureaucratic. Paperwork is easy to hide or encode. When I was little, she used to tell me that I was a ray of sunshine beaming into her life."

"And what did she say when you got older?"

"Remember Caesar, thou art mortal," said Elsa. "She always knew how to handle business."

"Wonderful. So you were planning to kill me," said Kristoff.

"No, no, no, you misunderstand. We weren't planning to kill you, we just had plans to kill you. There's a difference between being prepared and going through with something. Again, you underestimate yourself."

"Perfer et obdura; dolor hic tibi proderit olim," said Kristoff.

"You speak Latin? I... wouldn't have expected that," said Elsa.

"Everyone always insults the big dumb ice harvester. Nobody trusts an iceman. You're just a slab of meat that makes their life convenient."

"I don't think of you that way," said Elsa.

"Right, you just think I'm dangerous and want to kill me," said Kristoff.

"I just... would like the angel to sit with the Devil and break bread. For Jesus to drink with his Pharisee."

"Uh-huh," said Kristoff.

"Can we just-hrm. Can we just start over? Go back to the beginning?"

"Before you started rapping?"

"I stand by that," said Elsa.

"Okay," said Kristoff.

"Hi. My name is Elsa. I think you're an interesting person and full of surprises and intelligent and you make my sister happy and I'm really just wondering why we don't hang out more often?" asked Elsa.

Kristoff took a sip of the cosmo.

"This actually isn't half-bad," said Kristoff.

"I knew you'd like it," said Elsa, smiling.

"What's in it?" asked Kristoff.

Elsa shrugged.

"I don't like to ask too many questions. When you do that, you tend not to like the answers," said Elsa.

"It's just a drink," said Kristoff.

"The world is full of unpleasant details and things man was not meant to know. It's like opening up a box of chocolates, except the cherry filling is really sugary blood," said Elsa.

"That's morbid," said Kristoff.

"I prefer to think of myself as a realist. In fact... first things first, I'm the realest," said Elsa.

"Excuse me?" asked Kristoff.

"Don't you hear that? It's karaoke!" said Elsa.

Kristoff groaned. Elsa dragged him onto the stage.

"We're doing this," said Elsa.

Kristoff shook his head furiously.

"Vulcanize the whoopee stick!" sang Elsa.

"No!" shouted Kristoff.

"In the ham wallet

Cattle prod the oyster ditch

With the lap rocket," sang Elsa.

Kristoff bashed his head against a nearby cardboard. Elsa shot him a dirty look.

"Batter dip the cranny ax

In the gut locker

Retrofit the pudding hatch

Ooh la la

With the boink swatter," sang Elsa.

"Please, no," said Kristoff.

"If I get you in the loop when I make a point to be straight with you then

In lieu of the innuendo in the end know my intent though

I Brazilian wax poetic so pathetically

I don't wanna beat around the bush..." sang Elsa.

"... Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo," sang Kristoff.

"Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo!" sang Elsa.

"Marinate the nether rod

In the squish mitten

Power drill the yippee bog

With the dude piston," sang Elsa.

"Pressure wash the quiver... oh god," said Kristoff.

"In the bitch wrinkle! Come on!

Cannonball the fiddle cove

Ooh la la

With the pork steeple," sang Elsa. She elbowed Kristoff.

"If I get you in the loop when I make a point to be straight with you then..." sang Elsa, looking Kristoff straight in the eyes.

"In lieu of the innuendo in the end know my intent though."

"I Brazilian wax poetic so pathetically."

"I don't wanna beat around the bush!"

"Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo!"

"Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo!"

"Put the you know what in the you know where

Put the you know what in the you know where

Put the you know what in the you know where

Put the you know what in the you know where pronto," sang both of them.

They descended. Elsa was smiling. "See? I knew you'd like it. Just gotta open you up," said Elsa.

"Eh," said Kristoff.

Cleopatra winked at them. "You make a cute couple," said Cleopatra.

Just stepping off the bus was like stepping into a whole new world. It was the head rush and quick flow of blood of leaping off the diving board, or perhaps venturing into the local council housing, though the latter was too adventurous for even him. The first thing he noticed was the smell. It was almost musty, the half-recycled air of abandoned factories and warehouses, full of crushed dreams, palpably stinking of plastic lies, as gray as the concrete monoliths now surrounding him. The next thing was the sky. It was like the pelt of a dying wolf, all grays and whites, with occasional streaks of blood red, firey oranges struggling to break through. It was sunny, if you could call it that. The sky was almost cloudless, yet the whole affair had him longing for Jolly Old England. Supposedly, the sky got darker and redder as you headed east, presumably becoming

completely ominous as you left Ukraine-Belarus and crossed into Russia proper; there, the frightened traveller would see the Eye of Putin gazing from atop a Russia Today broadcast tower, searching tirelessly for gays.

To be frank, it was all quite trashy. Not the layout of the city-that was perfectly logical. In fact, it was entirely too logical, like the toy of some maddened city planner playing with real people. No, it was trashy in a tacky sort of way. The Soviets, evidently, had no sense of style, alternating between "gray is good" and "bigger is better". It was their greater flaw-oh, and the communism-but it was evident that the latter had been negotiable. The official name of India was quite upsetting to American sensibilities-The Islamic Social Republic of India and Caliphate of Maldonia-but, nevertheless, they had style. He recalled his stay in India. To his surprise, the Caliph himself had deigned to meet them. A guide was sent to lead them through the palace. The guide had pointed out that the gilded calligraphy formed the shape of a frog; that was simply delightful. It was a pleasing little anecdote, like a Jaffa cake for the mind, and one could never really get enough of those. It was slightly less pleasing to hear that the chamber had once been the last earthly pleasure political prisoners got to experience before their execution. The dining room was, in turn, grander still. The chairs were leafed with gold and silver, and the porcelain dinnerware was of the highest quality. It had belonged to former Queen-Empress Tiana. The Caliph had walked in, Armani suit smart on him, watch worth more than a year's wages snug on his wrist, with features less dark and quite a bit more dashing than the average Paki's, five o'clock shadow like an action movie star, and seated himself. It was enough to make him question his sexuality. The Caliph flipped a switch, and we found that the entire dining room was suspended within an aquarium. With a single nod of his head, servants burst into the room, each bearing a gift on a silk pillow. For me, it was a fierce warrior from the Gupta era cast in pewter. He noted the presence of a Surya statue on one of the pillows; and there on the other side, he saw the man from the Daily Mail receiving a statuette of a courier on a camel, with little metal letters spilling from the courier's bags. We were treated to everything Indian

cooking had to offer, and quite a bit more. The only disturbance that night had been when the Caliph dismissed himself to take a call. He returned several minutes later, visibly annoyed, but soon resumed his usual good demeanor. After the visit, he learned that ICT had conducted a raid on Hindu separatists; the ringleader was found and taken to Salimgarh Fort for questioning. The man loved talking about cars, and in particular, General Motors. A few years later, he noted with amusement that the Caliph had bought out GM. At the end of the dinner, the Caliph asked us all what theme we would like. Ancient Egypt was chosen, and sure enough, the next night the Caliph descended in from above, sickle and hammer crossed over his body, wearing a red and yellow headdress in the style of the old pharaohs. So it went for a whole week.

This? This could not and did not compare. Row after row of commieblock stretched out into a formless horizon, one writhing with thick, endless banks of fog, each threatening to swallow the entirety of time itself. Above, the gray sun shining a dull eye upon the world, an omnipresent judge hanging its Sword of Damocles over the world. He reminded himself that Corona A was, technically, in the convoluted geometries of geography, only a few miles away, a statement rapidly losing meaning. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a local policewoman. A saber, curved like the fang of a wolf, was strapped to her waist. It should've been a comforting sight, but the more he stared, the more he realized the little details. Little details like how the uniform was designed by Hugo Boss, the steely glint in the woman's eyes, the little eager stab-like jots with which she used her pen, the little tyrannies of traffic laws. How those little tyrannies could easily magnify themselves, with one type of stuffy bureaucrat transmogrifying into another. It was all a bit creepy, to be honest.

And, as if reacting to his thoughts, an army of chameleons scattered from under a wayward newspaper. The Common Pascal Chameleon, "native", in a sense, to Corona. At least, they were only found there. The only social chameleons in the world, according to one droning tour guide. Just another creepy feature of a creepy

country. It didn't help that the snake-green eyes of that dreadful woman they worshiped followed from a nearby billboard. What was this, dreadful American social commentary on a corrupt age? They certainly weren't green lights he'd like to follow. But he was delaying needlessly. Ahead of him was the key to his unremembered past. Just a few blocks beyond was the museum. Inside were all of the answers. Why his great-grandfather always teared up a bit around crocuses, why he could quote the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran with perfect accuracy, why he never trusted small holes, in short, why he was so weird. His face was ash gray, like the buildings all around him. He took a few shuffling steps forward. Then he broke into a trot. From there, a run.

And soon enough, he was confronted by the hand of God, dangling the sword overhead. There, in the middle of the square, was the hand. It was a single gun barrel severed from some unknown source, a half-removed statue base stuck to it, both of them welded to another metal platform. There was no Soviet soldier wielding this weapon, nor any nearby worker exerting himself. There was only the weapon, the weapon in and of itself, the weapon demanding worship and attention. For, in truth, had not they all lived to serve the weapon? Industrial goods had been diverted in vast quantities to feed it. Warfare had been reduced to a game of numbers-the fielding of the greatest number with the largest supply. People-infinitely unique and diverse people-were just more inputs into the machine. And yet, was it not the logical conclusion of all man's urges? Man systematized and man learned so that man may have progress. Man sought to advance in all things, including war. Man agonized over good and evil so that it would avoid the latter and seek the former. Men needed weapons to counter other men with weapons; thus, Man is armed. But take away all the arms, and Man still seeks blood. Even the apes and crawling creatures of the Earth fight for sustenance and survival. Man would simply kill Man with clumsy fists. Man sought elegance and efficiency. Thus, the weapon was an embodiment of Man's desire for perfection even in a most horrible art. If Man were to repudiate it, Man would repudiate the human project. These were the wages of sin: the original sin. Man cannot

improve himself without pain; as they say, "Man is both the marble and the sculptor." But what purpose lies in this pain? The pain reaches towards perfection in steady steps, yet what happens when perfection is reached? Purpose ceases. There can be no improvement beyond perfection, and to throw away the gains would be senseless. Thus, Man lives with a purpose that will ultimately end itself, and one that promises nigh-limitless suffering as the price of progress. But what alternative is there? To simply accept pleasure as a physical reaction, to deny pleasure through fulfillment? To reject the unique happiness of mankind and its enlightened happiness? Such is to deny the fruit of knowledge. Such is to regress back into animality. Man fights because he fears the night. In the night lies oblivion, the return to animal struggle.

Alexander wept because there were no more worlds to conquer; Aristotle wept because his pupil would one day have no worlds left for him, and what then? Happy, then, is the man who dies fulfilled, and does not have to face the void beyond fulfillment.

And it was over in an instant, the sensation not even penetrating beyond his subconscious. Happy is the man who faces the Abyss without realizing it. All that remained was a slight unease, permeating the air and water. Some horrific messages had once dwelt on that demon's talon, and he did not care to puzzle out their meaning. The half-scratches of white paint on black steel were left behind.

Beyond the statue was his destination. It was a small place, with only a quaint wooden sign to label it, the sign mouldering somewhat. The glass was fogging over, but he could spy a few vague shapes inside, knick-knacks no doubt. He opened the door towards his destiny.

Inside was an old man, polishing a mouse's skull. Around him was stuff. That was all you could call it. It was all the detritus of long lives lived, yet he could smell it was not the man's. It smelled musty, with a hint of dust. In a corner of the ceiling, a spider busied itself idling in a web. The man chuckled to himself softly; he had not noticed the entrance of his visitor. Thus he was what he was, the polisher of

skulls. And his visitor was merely a watcher, equally nameless, but far more purposeless.

He coughed.

He looked.

Introductions. "Hi, I'm Thomas," said Thomas, who was a reporter, who was from Britain, who had a wife estranged, and children, two quite fine, the daughter preferring his company, the son the mother's. Thomas, the man who was searching for the name and purpose of a great-grandfather he had never really known, a man who had perished when Thomas was scarcely five. And why?

"I'm Hans," said Hans, who curated the tiny little museum, who had wandered by an old house turned dumping ground, who had offered to sort and organize the goods, having nothing better to do that day, who had thus been pressed into service, who had followed the goods which were worth more than him in the hearts of men, who had watched the fall of the Eagle, who had picked the remnants of shattered Rothschild porcelain and half-burnt paintings in its nest, urgently searching for a piece of a more perfect world, who had taken his recovered things home with him, who had found his home soon ruled by men of the East, who had dedicated his life to these things.

He sorted. He cataloged. He researched. And he learned.

"So you run a museum dedicated to my family?" asked Thomas.

And the little skull polisher nodded and smiled.

"Yes, I do," said he.

And though his voice was hoarse, and he wanted for water, Thomas squeezed his words out: "Tell me."

Effects following naturally from causes, he did. So he did.

On a shelf, the toy horses of a boy, one who loved horses, of course. A boy grew up and became a trainer of horses, in his own peculiar way. A boy who loved to laugh, who loved teaching others to laugh, who found a pretty lady to laugh with. And he thought the rise of those small-minded marchers in their jackboots quite funny, but soon shuffled off the stage because of pneumonia, thus missing the punchline. The dolls of a little girl, who swaddled them like her own children, making mock promises to never leave them behind. She went to a school, found a man, and returned home to her castles. She had children, real flesh and blood children, that would replace her dolls. But she did not realize that the castles and their world would not have her. Out they went, evicted from their ancestral lands. They scattered like mice, taking only what they could stuff in their trunks, dresses, gold, a glass slipper, and departed for America. The dolls remained. A pair of fake guns for a pair of twins, who both loved roughhousing. One was bookish, the other preferred the saber. And one day, one was wasting away, having one of those diseases of blood given to those of nobility. And the other finished his education and then shot himself. Yarn for a girl who loved sewing. She loved sewing so much that she became a designer. She went to work for a company called Hugo Boss, found a bit of unpleasantness, went to France, found that the unpleasantness came to her, but lived through it. She grew grapes afterwards, and found it quite fine. A boy who was a prolific liar until it was beaten out of him, becoming honest to a fault instead. Indeed, he was so honest that he came to despise even the concept of lying. He learned mathematics, became a codebreaker for the Allies, and then spent the rest of his days in a university, debating the truth with Bernays. Another boy and his Union Jack. A love of Britain and all things British moved him. He couldn't get into Oxford, and at any rate, things seemed to be changing. And one day, he met a fine lady named Vickers, was filled with lead, and ended up in a muddy ditch in some godforsaken field.

"But one remains," said Thomas.

Hans said yes. "You are not the first to come here. Visitors are rare, and I would not make enough money to match my costs from them alone. Others have come, though. It was a cold day, I think, in fall perhaps. She was middle-aged, accompanied with a few children, and I wondered who would bring their children here. The magic exists here, but few feel it. Perhaps I am the only one. She looked around, then told me that her family once owned these things. I wondered if she wanted them back. She didn't. She was just glad someone was taking care of them. She had found a slipper, once, up in the attic. It had just gathered dust. I think... that perhaps I have dedicated my whole life to this. Yes, used up all of my vital energies on it; a thoroughly consuming project it is. But, but, but it fascinates me. This woman, look all around you, it is this woman! She lives a poor life, but through her hard work, she builds a family, they love her, she perseveres through hardship and toil for them, she keeps striving despite all the wickedness of the world, how can one not admire such a woman? Looking at all these things, do you not feel her hopes and dreams? Do you not see the course of her life, its highs and lows? I think, perhaps, that I am in love with this woman. Strange, I know. But such is the thing as it is. And what you came here for... is a box."

And he produced a box. Inside, a crocus necklace, a Qu'ran, a comital crown, a half-burnt quill pen, and a vial full of sand.

Every day, Reinhard walked by the severed gun barrel of the *Maximus* on his way to school. Though they had done their best to scrub it off, you could still see the faintest remnants of an ejaculating horsecock drawn on it. Before the ship had gone down, it sank the *HMS Jasmine*, *Buttercup*, *Candytuft*, *Eyebright*, *Primrose*, and *Veronica*, finally succumbing to fire from the *Revenge*, *Arrogant*, and *Vindictive*. The engagement was one of the only naval victories they had in WWI, as most of the time the British navy had overwhelming superiority in either quantity, quality, or positioning. However, despite many letters requesting it, Rudolf Binding refused to write a poem about the pulsating action of the *SMS Maximus* 's horsecock as it

utterly ravaged the *Jasmine* and *Veronica*, coating their poop decks with burning white phosphorous. It was a very crude, simple monument, designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator.

It mattered not to Reinhard. He was but eleven. For him, this day was much like any other. He returned from school, went upstairs, and studied. His dad brought his food upstairs. It was Wednesday, and Wednesdays were when Dad met with friends.

A loud crashing noise came from below. Then commotion. Reinhard snuck into the hallway, crept down the stairs, and took a look.

"You are intruding on a private dinner," said Dad's friend. His face was red and he was shaking. Two men were in the doorway, both in uniform. The door was on the floor.

Dad's friend marched right towards them, then a loud noise rang out, then he fell over, clutching his chest. Dad rose from his chair.

"I'll come peacefully," he said.

"We'll be the judges of that," said one uniformed man.

They went into the kitchen and dragged out the maid.

"Who's this whore?" asked one of the men, eyes practically bulging from their sockets.

He threw her to the ground and kicked her in the gut. He turned her over and looked her over. He grabbed her necklace and tore it off.

"What the hell is this? A fucking flower? Come on, woman, explain yourself," said the man.

She just sobbed and whimpered.

"Talk to me!" he said, kicking her again.

She vomited up a bit of food. She grabbed at her own long, blonde hair.

"TALK! Talk, damn you!" he said.

"Stop, you'll get nowhere with this. She doesn't speak German," said Dad.

"We're suffering, and you choose to employ some foreign slut? What'd she do? Suck your dick? Give your knob a little nibble? What would you make you employ fucking scum like this? Or are you just a goddamn traitor? That's it, isn't it? You're a goddamn traitor to your race and you fucking love foreigners. I ought to kill you where you stand," said the man.

"She has nowhere else to go. Show some compassion."

"I know where she can go: six feet under," said the man.

"Look, I'm walking over. I'm raising my hands," said Dad, raising his hands. He stepped, slowly, carefully, methodically, towards them.

"No funny business," said the man.

"No funny business," said Dad, "just leave her alone."

"You're a real piece of work, you know that? You think you're better than us?" asked the man.

"No. I'm surrendering. Do with me what you will," said Dad.

Then they seized him by the collar, gave him a swift blow to the head, and dragged him out into the night. The door still lay there, on the ground, prostrate and bare. The maid was sobbing.

Reinhard took a breath. Then he doubled over, sobbing.

The next morning, he was visited by a strange man who introduced himself as Albert Grzesinski. He was told to find von Seeckt. He and

the maid were both given false papers by Grzesinski. He could not do anything more. Time was very quickly running out.

Von Seeckt smuggled them both into Turkey. There, they were housed by a friendly pair of aged, aristocratic expatriates. Reinhard went into their schools, but did poorly, made few friends, and did not apply himself. His grades were bad. After many years, the couple prepared to move on, this time to America. Ataturk, on his deathbed, had predicted war. And many could see the clouds gathering over Europe. Reinhard stayed. Perhaps he should not have. If he had left, he would've been able to find the other branches of his family, which had moved to America immediately after the First World War. But such as it was, he instead signed onto a trade caravan. The caravan went from Turkey to the Kingdom of Syria through the Empire of Assyria. At that time, Assyria was fighting border conflicts against the Kingdom of Iraq and the Republic of Kurdistan. The merchant wanted his goods well-protected and hired many mercenaries. In Assyria, Reinhard watched Assyrian tanks roll out while the merchant negotiated terms with Emperor Sargon III. The tanks were being seen off by girls in white dresses; they were rolling out to the Kurd front. From Assyria, they crossed a long, hostile No Man's Land into Iraq. From there, they pressed on into Ducal Syria. Ducal Syria because it was administered by a duke. The Ottomans had never been able to solidify their grasp on the Middle East, and many provinces were administered as iqta, plots of land contracted out to whichever group of local aristocracy could win them. The new British-backed king found controlling the desert equally as difficult, especially without the vast manpower reserves of the Ottoman Empire. Bedouin warriors were notoriously unreliable, often switching mid-battle to the winning side. The Middle East could only be held with a doctrine of armored cars and airplanes. But such war machines were expensive, as was manpower. Disgruntled veterans of the First World War converged on the Middle East, many unable or unwilling to assimilate back into civilian life. Some joined militias fighting over the future of British Palestine, but many others chose to forge their own path. They would either be given land or take it for themselves. The King of Syria had little choice but to accede to the

rapaciousness of the mercenaries; they were the only ones keeping radical Islamists and various rebels out of power. These lordlings began to carve their fiefs out of the desert, funding their conquests with oil. Armored cars and airplanes were the order of the day, and the more one owned, the more powerful one was.

Reinhard fought well, and soon found himself at a very important battle. Win, and he was promised a comital crown. Lose? Death.

"And, you know, that is just the nature of the creature, that's right. He sent the box of things away, to a address that could not be right but still lived in his heart, which was his old home in Germany, and perhaps, you know, it would outlive him and be a memorial if he died. After all, he did not know if he still had family of blood, that were kin, you see. And the package was not delivered, so they returned it to the sender, but that was returned in turn. And he had already forgotten about it, but the package continued to circle around. And that's just the nature of things, you know. People, they get things, they are affected by other people, but they don't know how or why, it's just random things entering their life, even if they are touches from others, so they just keep sending it along the line, and it just cycles. And nobody really wants to take time out of their day to find where this box is from or where it is going, so it just keeps going. And eventually, this box finds its way to me."

And the skull polisher looked at the clock, which was now striking midnight, and sighed in perfect contentment. So it was, and all was right with the world.

"But what happened next?" asked Thomas.

"Who knows? He eventually leaves at some point. Many records were lost when the Ba'athists took control."

"So... that's it then," said Thomas.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," said Hans.

Thomas looked at the room, strange as it was. Things, all of these things, and none of them had the answers. He wanted to scream. But then he smiled. He smiled, he gave the skull polisher a little wave, thanked him, and left.

The sun was smiling, reaching past clouds to kiss the earth. From a nearby billboard, the Coronan's beloved Kaiserin looked on, eyes soft. A friendly policewoman patrolled the streets, swinging her billy club and whistling.

After all, was he not a seeker of truth? What was discovery without the journey? There were deserts to explore, tombs to discover, places to find. If the skull polisher had simply given him the answer, he would have robbed him of his purpose. So he left for his purpose and left the skull polisher to his own.

The answers were out there.

Elsa jerked awake. Anna was there for her, holding on tight. Elsa was panting-Anna wiped Elsa's forehead clean of sweat. Elsa could only say she was sorry, over and over again, twitching and sweating, crying, crying so hard. Anna just held on.

The bed was drenched with sweat. Only 9:37 in blinking red illuminated the room.

That, and her toothy smile, always ready.

"You had a nightmare, huh?" asked Anna.

"Imagine, if you will, in a long distant jungle, an altar. Let us, you and I, walk towards the altar, supplicants towards a wicked and uncaring god. As we raise our arms in praise, we wonder what the next day may bring. Most importantly, we wonder if it is enough. If, tomorrow, the sun is sated and rises once more."

Elsa blinked back tears.

"It's very hard, Anna. I don't want you to understand, don't you see? Don't you see I'm leading you astray?" asked Elsa.

"I don't need to understand," said Anna.

"And this wicked god asks for the sacrifice of her dearest, the one closest to her heart. How can she say no? The sun must rise. She agrees. And she accepts. And she rises. And I don't even know who I am anymore. Who can suffer in silence?" asked Elsa.

"I can," said Anna, hugging Elsa, "it's my job. I know my God is a just one."

"That wasn't the dream," said Elsa.

"I know. But like I said, I don't need to understand. I just need to be there for you," said Anna. She smiled and kissed Elsa on the forehead.

Elsa entered the room and flicked the lights, already sighing. The lights didn't turn off. Typical. Always typical.

There would be no end to her torment, for saith the LORD, there is no rest for the wicked. She exhaled; she knew that she would come soon. She took a deep breath, summoning up all of her strength.

Her own breath stank deeply of brimstone and rotten things. If her soul was food, she was certain she would gag on it. A finger tapped lightly on her shoulder. She turned around, eyes wide and hands shaking. Anna was there, smiling like a woman possessed. Also much smaller and younger than she was used to.

"Annie want bananie!" chirped Anna, latching onto Elsa like a lamprey.

Elsa tensed up as she grabbed on, shying away from... it. It was only a construct of her own mind. She shuffled towards the bone-

white refrigerator, noting several poorly done crayon drawings pinned to it. Another Anna came running up, her stubby little legs carrying her as fast as they could, her chubby little cheeks wobbling as she gurgled crude airplane noises. A third dropped in from above, wearing a pumpkin suit.

"Weeeeeeeee, pumpkin ride Elsa! Pumpkin STRONK," said the third Anna.

A fourth Anna started yanking on her dress. Where did these things come from?

"Elsie, where food come from? Food come from food tree?" asked Anna.

Elsa opened the refrigerator. Empty. She figured as much. The light inside blinked on and off, like a mocking firefly. She didn't like to make things easy for herself, apparently. Was there any point checking the pantry?

No. There wasn't. "Well then, I suppose we can go out to get ice cream," said Elsa with a condescending smile.

She was swarmed by tiny, mentally deficient Annas. She coughed politely.

"Is this really what you think of your sister?"

The voice was cold. Heartless. Familiar. She knew what she'd find. So why look?

Elsa looked and saw her young self, still in that blue dress. Elsa scowled.

"Everyone has an inner child, Elsa. Embrace yours," said the child.

"Why must mine also be my conscience?" asked Elsa.

"Because only she who is without sin may cast the first stone. But, my dear," said child Elsa, spitting out the last word with force, "you are evading the question."

"No, of course not," said Elsa.

Child Elsa walked over to a counter, jumped up, and sat. She gave Elsa a smile, one with a cocked eyebrow. She tilted her head.

"Do go on. You imagine your sister as being barely functional for what reason? So you can take of her? So-"

Anna interjected. "Yes, that's exactly correct. She's a lovely young woman who is responsible and cares for her sister very much. I don't appreciate you hassling her like that. So. Like. Stop it. Stop it right now. You big meany stinky poopyhead."

Anna. Regular Anna. Devoted. Pure. Bright. Wonderful.

Child Elsa clapped slowly. "If I were a bit stupider, that would almost be a good defense. It's too bad I'm you, isn't it?"

She jumped down and looked skeptically at Anna. She tutted a few times.

"Skin devoid of blemishes. Eyes eager and with a little glowing spark of love. Rosy cheeks. Lovely dress. Carefree, innocent smile. Just enough awkwardness to be endearing without ruining all of your plans. Absent-minded, so she doesn't notice what you are. How disgustingly perfect. You sicken me."

Elsa shifted uncomfortably.

"Both of these are mere constructs to wash away your guilt. If she is too stupid to really understand her actions, can she really be evil? Only the mere instinctive gropings of an animal remain. There is no evil without intent, only nature. And what of this... one. I hesitate to refer to it as a person. It is a graven idol; a woman devoid of evil is a

goddess, not a woman. She is your very own personal Virgin Mary to worship. Heretic. Will you remind yourself of the truth? Or will you continue lying to yourself?"

Child Elsa looked up at the Heavens, her face contrite with rage. "Will no one rise to defend this harlot of Babylon? Will she see her touch of rot? Who shall be her protector as we walk the Valley of Death?"

And Elsa heard the clinking of steel and smelled the acrid whiff of burnt powder. She heard the faint screams of dying innocents and smelled the copper tang of blood. She noticed her eyes were shut, shut hard, for they were the shutters of a shop closing down and fortifying for a coming riot. Elsa opened her eyes and saw.

A missing arm, for this was the cost of war. A missing eye, for who would want to see the horrors all around? Hair, red as merciless fire consuming entire towns. Scars all over. A greatcoat to protect her from all sorts of colds. And that sword, curved to bite like nipping frostbite, coated with the blood of countless souls.

Souls who had defied her, at the end of the day.

"I will," said Anna.

"Protect her? Yes, of course. That's the problem, and she knows it. You are an endless abyss, Elsa. And she looked in you for the slightest spark of goodness and found NOTHING. You make monsters out of men. You pretend to regret. You pretend to even be disgusted. But you know that everything she does, you wanted. How utterly contemptible a woman you are. To make an innocent into your hatchet. To break the pure for the sake of your own damned self. She only does that which you want to do but hate to do yourself. When she slays your enemies, is it not because you desire it? And if she sleeps easily afterwards, is it not because she cannot see the evil that lurks within your heart? Cowardice. It was your cowardice. Your INABILITY to be the monster they thought you were. Your INABILITY to face your own evil. And in your WEAKNESS, you foist

this evil upon one who has done nothing to deserve it. You corrupt others because you are afraid to corrupt yourself. But you have knowledge of such; do you not realize you are already damned? You do. And yet you damn others anyways. You are more than just a sinner. You are the maker of sinners, a lure calling them to ruin."

Child Elsa's eyes burned with hatred.

"Enough with these illusions. I have come to end you, Echidna," said child Elsa.

With a flick of those terrible gloved hands, she shattered one of the child Annas. With another, she shot a spike up through Anna, the Anna that had deserved none of this. It burst out of her mouth, coated with blood and bits of intestine. A snow blast went at the demon, but she swatted it aside with her saber, gritting her teeth. But another attack pinned her throat to the wall; she grabbed the ice forming around her airway, desperately clawing at it as she struggled for air. The remaining children looked on with only partial understanding.

"Elsa, help!" said one.

Elsa ran.

Down hallways wallpapered with rosemaling and covered with doors. There was not a corner in a sight. The hallways were endless and twisting, lined with tendrils of oozing flesh, pink and raw, covered with staring eyes. Her heart was pounding. It was oppressively hot, the kind of heat of dog days deep in summer, ones with swarms of mosquitos, and humidity enough to drown men on land; it was the heat of a day to drive one to murder, murder if it would only end the cries of that relentless heat. Elsa was sweating. She couldn't breath, the gulps of air getting trapped in her throat. Her legs burned like molten iron flowed through them.

The hallways continued ever onwards. They swam through her vision, fading and distorting, shimmering and shaking. Elsa wanted

to scream, but it came out as a squeak. It was pathetic. She was pathetic. A door burst open, sending an icy arm surging towards her. It latched on, a loud hissing and cloud of steam coming from where it touched. Elsa ran herself towards a wall, slamming the arm into it. The impact rang through her whole body, making even her bones shake, but the arm shook too. She grabbed at it and tore it off, hurling it backwards. She looked at her arm; there was now a crust of ice crystals forming on it. She kept running.

At the end of the hallway was a single open door. She went through.
9:28.

Elsa was in the middle of a field, gentle rolling hills around her. Squares of men in bright uniforms festooned with shiny gold buttons and tassels stood nearby. A little beyond were tents with flags flapping in the wind. Batteries were emplaced on several hills, daring the enemy to approach. In the distance, a large cloud of roiling white ice and snow.

And Anna was there, a raven perched on her shoulder, her bad eye exposed, the white orb looking blankly outwards at the world, a musket clutched tight in her one good hand. A few gray-cloaked Arendellan soldiers, reminders of a long lost Teutonic crusading past, readied their muskets.

"I'll protect you, Elsa. That's a promise," said Anna. She hugged Elsa.

Elsa sat there, holding her head in her hands. The lines of men fired towards the cloud, their shots fading impotently into its billowing mass.

Then she was upon them like the avenging storm of Zeus. With a single swipe, she clawed a score of men down, ice shards forming in the air and in their guts. A flick brought spikes to bear against another line of men. Raised hands raised shields of ice, blocking cannonballs and musket shot. Smoke billowed out of gun barrels as they discharged.

"Is the shadow not powerless against the light? Does sunlight not banish the night with its very existence?" asked child Elsa.

"It is worthy and sweet to die for country and queen. There can be no more fitting death," said a soldier.

More gunshots. The battlefield disappeared in gunsmoke.

Elsa felt a hand dragging her away.

She could keep up at first, but she quickly lost her footing. She fell. Her face plowed through sod and grass until it, at last, gave way to mud. She felt a deep cold strike her square in the chest. Her face dropped right into more mud.

She opened her eyes. Brown everywhere. It was dark. The sun had gone down. In the distance, a wolf howled, a long hungry howl, a howl pregnant with longing for the moon. She lifted her head. In front of her were dirt walls, covered hastily with a few planks. She stood. She was in a trench at the edge of a large field, a few trampled stalks of grain and burning haystacks breaking the sea of green. Behind her were a few trees, woodpeckers drilling their daily routines. Anna was there, riding a red horse, spear in hand, gas mask everything but her brilliant eyes. A patch with a Corinthian helm was sewn into the shoulder of her dark olive uniform. Beside her were some rolled-up maps and charts with all sorts of cryptic symbols.

"They're not as complicated as they look. I mean, you're a genius. If a dummy like me can figure them out, well..." said Anna.

The symbols swirled about, completely devoid of meaning. Across the field was the same white cloud. A legion of the dead emerged from it, eyes empty and rimmed with viscous bile. Their wounds were open, oozing with congealing blood and pus. Their weapons were gripped with deathly rigor, their uniforms torn by battles unknown. The smell was overpowering. It smelled like overripe fruit, expired

candy, half-eaten cake left waiting for an abandoned sister. Elsa gagged on it.

"There's no point in shying from death. 'Those who seek death shall live. Those who seek shall die.' It's really not so hard to figure out when you get down to it! Maybe that's why I'm so good at it. It's simple, like me. A dead body... well, it's really where we're all heading, right? They can even be fun! Give them a few pokes like they're a big blob of taffy! Please don't be sick, Elsa."

Elsa smiled weakly as she struggled to hold back vomit. The stench was everywhere. Woodpeckers waited overhead, tapping out their meaningless oaths. The angry dead began their march across the field.

Machine guns opened fire, tearing ragged holes in diseased, rotting flesh. Chunks of meat flew off, hitting the ground, splattering bile and pus everywhere. Their mouths leaked mucus and slime. Anna clapped her hands over Elsa's ears. Moments later, the thundering boom of artillery vibrated down Anna's arms, shaking Elsa down to her bones. Wave after wave was reduced to mush and scattered viscera, charred by the intense heat of white phosphorous. Still, they advanced.

"Those wronged by you seek vengeance. They shall have it," said child Elsa.

Elsa threw up. Her eyes were watering, and it was a struggle just to stay standing. She stumbled forward, the vomit squishing in her high heels as she walked. The smell certainly did not help. She could feel the world grow hotter and hotter; the sky was filling with coal-black fumes and noxious puke-colored gas. She screamed but didn't hear herself. She brought her hand up to her left ear-it was bleeding.

She wanted to cry but couldn't. There was no moisture in the ducts, no ammunition in the holds.

"Elsa, do you trust me?"

Anna. Elsa didn't get a chance to answer; Anna tackled her into a nearby ditch. Elsa felt the heat intensify, then felt the thumping of bullets impacting the flesh-the body-the person-on her. Ragged breathing.

Vision blurring. Footsteps closer.

Darkness all around. A perfect black.

From the very beginning, the British Middle East had been built on lies. They had said they wanted to share power with the French. That was a lie. They had planned for French spheres of influence to be as small as possible, and had planned to subvert these spheres at every opportunity. They promised Palestine to the Arabs. They promised Palestine to the Jews. Both were lies, or at best, half-truths. Palestine was for both of them, under the kind and firm hand of the British Empire. Palestine was to be a permanent base for Middle Eastern operations. The British public had been told Arab rebels played a large part in the fighting. This, too, was a lie. Allied Arab rebels numbered in the low thousands. The Hashemites promised far more than they could possibly deliver. But the public was told of their exploits, nonetheless. Assyrian militias were promised a homeland. They had to carve it out themselves, betrayed in the peace settlement. Kurds soon found British promises equally empty. The British said that the region could be cheaply pacified. More than a hundred thousand Wahhabi tribals waited in the wings for their chance. British policy had always been to claim the Ottomans necessary for regional stability; this made the Ottomans necessary, as lasting European stability and a balance of power was supposedly on the top of the British to-do list. Evidently, the Ottomans were no longer necessary, and preserving balance antiquated. Lie, lie, lie. Pile lie upon lie until a solid foundation is poured. The British had divided, they had conquered, and they only needed enjoy said conquests.

In a blink, they were undone. An American knife had struck them right in the back. At last, the son had surpassed the father.

Seamlessly, the Americans moved in to replace the British.

His eyes slowly opened. Two men were in front of him, both smoking cigarettes. One was staring past him. The other shuffled cards.

Who was he?

He gasped. Before he could blink, they both turned around, guns leveled at him. They eyed him warily. One nodded towards the other. One was tall, his features aquiline, his nose almost beak-like, his eyes gray as the industrial wastes all around - a bit hawkish, really.

The other was short and squat, eyes slit thin, hair blond as straw. Fat puffed up his eyelids and cheeks. He laughed.

And he nearly crapped himself - him the prisoner, not him the soldier - everything was dreadfully confusing, he had to hide his feelings, conceal them, conceal, don't feel.

"Der Gefangene wach," he said. That's right, he was American. And these men must be... Nazis? And his name was... Robert. Robert Steele.

He sounded like a goddamn action hero. It's too bad this wasn't a movie.

They kept their guns pointed at him. The tall one examined him, waiting for him to make a move.

"Kannst pan Koronische sprechren?" asked the short one.

He was silent. They both looked at each other.

"Kannst du Deutsch sprechren?" asked the tall one.

He coughed.

"Bist pan Niemcy?" asked the short one. They both laughed uproariously - as if it was the funniest joke in the world.

"Lass ihn in Ruhe. Gehen wir!" said the tall one. He turned to Robert. "Come!"

At least, it sounded like come. Perhaps a harder c than he was accustomed to. They looked at him expectantly. Robert stood. They nodded.

They walked, the three of them, through the ruins of a city. The buildings were all stripped down to bare concrete and steel. The ground was layered thick with ashes, gray and soft. It was like walking through fresh powder. Everything smelled smoky, a bit like his father's tobacco pipe. Except, of course, on a much grander scale. A much, much grander scale.

"Es ist oft so einsam hier draussen," said the short one, "so viele leere Räume."

"Willst du einen Schneemann bauen?" said the tall one in a monotone.

"Ja! Darauf kannst du Gift nehmen! Du mich auch, Schweinehund," said the short one. He slapped his ass and puckered his lips. The tall one smirked.

They all walked on a while longer in silence. In truth, everything in these hallowed spaces was silent, for no one was left to speak. All around were ashen gray forms, bent, as if fighting.

Or, perhaps, praying. Praying for something. Little gray snowflakes descended from above, falling from big dark clouds, like the tears of an old graybeard.

The short one looked back at Robert.

"Du hast Hunger?" asked the blond.

"Ich glaube, ja," said the redhead.

The short one took off his pack and searched. He pulled out a few pieces of lint, an apple, and a chocolate bar.

"Schokolade oder Apfel? Ist alle Wurst?" he asked, chuckling a bit.

"What's the worst?" asked Robert.

"Das ist mir Wurst!" said the short one, laughing.

Then he gave both to Robert. He waited for a moment. Robert took a bite of the apple.

"Es ist Koronische Apfel. Ist gut, ja?" asked the short one.

Robert didn't know what to say.

"Es komme aus Ostpreussen! Koronische Apfel, Koronische Apfel uber alles," said the short man, beaming.

The other one raised an eyebrow.

"Du hast Frau? Ich habe eine Konstantynopolitanczykowieczka! Alle Madchen sind Frau, ja?" said the short one. He was nearly bursting into tears. The other one gave him a look of mixed disgust and amusement.

"Pan bist Niemcy," the short one said, sighing before smirking.

Robert finished his apple and they started moving again. After a while, they stopped. Robert nearly ran into the redhead.

In front of them was a large figure draped over a smaller one, hands forever holding the little one, hair burnt gray, their heads pressed together. Their bare teeth were clashed together, lips gone.

The tall man shot him a look, barely disguised hatred simmering in his eyes. The short one put his hand on the tall one's shoulder. The

tall one looked down.

They kept walking.

They came to a clearing. Swastikas had been painted over, replaced by golden suns. An artillery piece stood, glaring at the sun. "Pfannen sind Niemcy" was scrawled in white on the barrel. All sorts of soldiers were gathered there. In the center was a man squatting on a pile of melted guns. His nose was truly indescribable. By him were two men in thick greatcoats, fur caps, and snow goggles. Their faces were wrapped up tight. They had crests depicting lightning bolts over crocuses scattered all over their clothing. Robert stepped back - they were SS! - though he could not remember the unit. Anno?

The squatting man pulled up to his full height. With a shock, Robert realized he was now dwarfed. His presence was almost regal, the sun glinting off the gun throne beneath.

"Sie denken, ich bin ein Turke?" he said. "Nein! Mein Tasche ist nicht Wolfleder. Es ist Loweleder!"

Robert was cowed but confused. The kingly man stared at him, eyes full of disdain. Then contempt gave way to confusion. He looked around, then back at Robert.

"Bist pan Niemcy?" he asked. Everyone laughed.

"Er spricht kein Deutsch," said the tall one.

"Warum in Herrgotts Namen...? Warum ihn in aller Welt?" said the kingly man.

"Die Anderen sind tot," said the tall one in a very matter-of-fact tone.

The short one shrugged. The kingly man slapped his own face.

They all convened, and Robert was immediately struck by the diversity of languages that ensued - tongues battled for dominance. After a few moments, they turned back to face him.

"You can understand me?" asked one of the SS men.

Robert blinked twice.

"Y-y-yes, I can," Robert said.

"Gut. Good. I have a very simple task for you," said the SS man.

"What?" asked Robert.

"Go back to your masters and tell them we wish to... parley," said the SS man.

"My leaders?"

"Yes, your songs too," said the SS man. Then he turned up his face and scowled. "Never mind that. You must let your commanders know that your enemies are also our enemies, and that we wish to make peace."

"Okay," said Robert.

He ran from the encampment as fast as his legs could take him.

His footsteps faded away.

"Do you think he understood?" asked Franz, brushing back his blond hair.

"By God, I hope so. Otherwise we're all doomed," said King Eugene.

Several wings of aircraft flew overhead. Eugene pointed at them.

"Of course, if he didn't, we can't really blame him. We're all deaf men here, right? The falcon cannot hear the falconer," said Eugene.

Prior to the First World War, only 1% of Jews supported Zionism. Why would they? They were, for the most part, well-integrated into

their home countries. There was no reason to surrender good lives in Europe for an uncertain existence barely eked out of harsh, desolate sands with enemies all around. It would be utter foolishness. The First World War changed everything forever.

Threats rose from both the Left and Right. Many old-fashioned conservatives came together and pooled their resources. Ludendorff met with Horthy, deals were cut, leagues readied. Battle lines were drawn. The radical Right and old Right partnered together. The conservatives and reactionaries intended to use their proto-Fascist allies against the rising Left. Pogroms were carried out against perceived enemies of the state: communists, Jews, women, gays. The world burned.

They were fighting back, or, at least, saw themselves as fighting back. Reds were swarming across the Continent, tearing down established society and withering away norms and standards. Europe's stability had to be preserved. Many moderates agreed. The revolts were put down, often quite brutally, with suppression far exceeding the violence of the rebellions themselves. It seemed an almost inhuman amount of violence. The rebels themselves had not been so violent.

Then again, perhaps they had never really had the chance. The White International killed Jews. But Stalin would kill Jews too - they were too cosmopolitan, too disconnected from the nation. What would happen when the state failed to dissolve? When Utopia failed to come? Would they make their good place into a no place? They never had the chance to destroy themselves, others destroyed them and saved them the trouble of suicide. A favor, really.

Across Europe, things darkened for the Jews. All but one place, one Sun burning bright. A place where, some say, a special path was set long ago. In time immemorial, the Jews had been protected by the Pope and the King. The King was oft fickle, but who would argue with the Vicar of Christ? His loving hand safeguarded the Jews, though his warriors, many times, would torment the Jews. But he would display his terrible wrath, for the Kingdom of God was his, and

revoke the Papal bulls of these uncouth men. And sometimes it would be a man of God, perhaps implicitly supported by the Pope. But, still, they had some measure of protection. But King sought to usurp God. He sought power; he got it. Now, these poor souls lived under the shifting wills of Kings alone, their lives banished to the void by fickle Queens and wicked Kings. Only the Poles would shelter them. So they came. And the Coronans continued to protect them once they took over those sun-kissed lands. Frederick the Great was one of the first to give Jews true rights. A special path.

Or perhaps not. A far more terrifying thought. Perhaps genocide is an inevitable product of modernity. Perhaps it is the monster lurking behind every government, waiting to awaken, sleeping lightly, waiting for just one bad year. Perhaps it is the inevitable cost of civilization. Blood is the price of the sun also rising.

They fled to the last place that would take them. And there? There, they plotted their revenge. They were a people wronged, and they would have vengeance. Here, another peculiar thing presents itself. What if Hitler had led them from the beginning? Would they have slain the Jews? Is genocidal hunger a thing lying in the hearts of all peoples?

They started a war. They lost.

The problem of Patton was an interesting one. The man was clearly talented. But also, just as clearly, absolutely mad. He wanted to invade the Soviet Union. It was an impossible thing to ask of command. Plans were made. They could have assassinated him. But, instead, they developed a plan. They would use his talents. An invasion force was prepared. His unique skills would be brought to bear on the Middle East.

Then, suddenly, Patton got himself killed. An unpleasant thing. Now who would lead the invasion? Their eyes searched and scanned. There was a general waiting in their prisons, about to be tried and executed for war crimes. He was an expert in armored warfare and could fight well with extremely limited supplies.

Rommel was given a choice, but it was hardly a fair one. Serve or lose your whole family. He served. At any rate, his men still needed him. In characteristic British form, he was crowned King of Israel. He was not Jewish, but no Jew would take the honor - they were too clever for that sort of thing.

After all, they didn't want to risk their own men. There were millions of Jews that needed to be resettled, resettled away from a vengeful European population. The invasion began.

11 April 1948. They took Jerusalem on that day. By then, all of the planned UN Jewish mandate was theirs. It had been three days. Many wanted to go father, so they did. Emergency powers were granted to Rommel. The new state of Israel was placed under international embargo, and the Soviets rushed supplies to the Arab states. Zionist militias flocked to Rommel's banner while Arab states formed coalitions against him.

Thus began Rommel's last, greatest campaign. Back during the Crusades, the crusaders had known the strategic value of Egypt and Transjordan. Humbling the Arab states was a matter of national security for the fledgling state. Otherwise it would exist in a perpetual state of terror, forever surrounded by strong, hostile powers. But the outcome was not in doubt. The soldiers of Israel were all hardened veterans, who had survived grueling battles in the Eastern Front or long odds battles against superior enemy materiel in the West. A quick strike south annihilated the Egyptian army, the only one potentially able to inflict harm. They confronted the Egyptian forces in Sinai, baiting the trap with seemingly overextended supply lines. When the Egyptians struck, the Israelis quickly doubled back, disorganizing the Egyptians and throwing them back across the Suez. The others provided little resistance. Their armies were still tribal in mentality, with operations manuals hoarded by higher officers. The troops were disorganized and prone to mutiny or desertion. Rommel soon found himself in control of every enemy capital.

The war would come to be known as the Six Month's War. The Israelis soon brokered peace with all of their thoroughly defeated neighbors. Territories were returned. Palestine was snuffed out, never to return.

With that settled, a sort of democracy descended, but only for a moment. While Rommel stepped back, it was not the case that pure democracy could rule; the Israelis would be outvoted by their new Arab majority. Assimilation policies had to be enacted. Martial law was declared. Israel was made into a one-party state, a dictatorship of the Wehrmacht Party, a political party composed of army officers and veterans. Intellectuals had planned to revive Hebrew. Those plans were ignored. Yiddish became the official language of Israel. The Orthodox Jews were suppressed. They did not provide manpower and resources for the Israeli state, and thus were a liability. Germanization and Judaization policies were enforced. Rabbis were bribed to give concrete theological justification for the mass conversion of Arabs, a policy otherwise unsupported by Jewish tradition. New theological ideas were quickly fabricated, and the process began. Arab children were forced to learn Yiddish. Converts were favored, while those who clung to Islam were persecuted and discriminated against. People tried to rebel. They were put down. All the technology and manpower stood with the state. Bit by bit, the Arab identity in Palestine was stamped out. The Wehrmacht party would brook no opposition.

In 1956, the Americans recognized Israel. Official recognition from the rest of the West soon followed. Israel was vital to American policy in the Middle East, which they had inherited from the collapsed British Empire. They needed a permanent pro-West wedge to drive into the Middle East. Israel would be America's Airstrip One. While the Americans were nominally spreading freedom, they were more or less happy to support dictatorial regimes that furthered their interests. Israeli democratic reform did not come from the US but from within. Rommel was dying. His health had greatly deteriorated during the war, as he was captured and shuffled from prison camp to prison camp. By all accounts, he should have been

dead. The man stayed alive because he still had a duty to discharge - he willed himself to live. He had to ensure his soldiers, the men who had followed him loyally through hell and high water, were cared for. But by the 1950s, things were stabilizing. The old veterans had settled down, and the distant Fatherland was stable, even if divided. Final arrangements had been made for the rule of post-war Germany and Corona. North Corona and North Germany were given to the West; South Corona and South Germany to the East. By then, Rommel's body was riddled with tumors, and several of his internal organs were failing. At last, it was time to die.

On June 19th, 1958, they laid Rommel to rest. In November, they had their first elections. Suffrage was limited to ethnic Germans and Ashkenazi Jews, as other elements of society were still seen as disloyal. Almost immediately, the party split. It was inevitable with a one-party system. Placing all political life into one party would cause differences in opinions; these differences widened into a real party split. The left had always been powerful in Corona. It had dominated Coronan history, and socialism had naturally planted deep roots after the departure of Bismarck. The National Socialists, thus, had their own socialist elements. These persisted when they relocated to Israel. The more extreme portions of Nazi policy were no longer palatable, not for the West, not for the settlers. But socialism still held a strong appeal. Thus, the first split was caused by socialism. Israel had been a state founded on iron and blood, naturally putting workers' rights in the back seat. But, by the 1950s, the situation was mostly stable. The party began to debate furiously. Was it still necessary to emphasize defense? Could the state focus on improving the life of the common man? The party split into a left-wing and a right-wing. The left wanted to reduce defense expenditures, rerouting that cash to welfare and social programs. The right wanted to maintain the status quo. The party divided into the Wehrmacht Party and the Labor Party. Though the Wehrmacht Party held power, the Labor Party was able to make inroads in key policy areas. It won several constituencies, including Jerusalem itself, and was able to reduce the power of the Chancellor, who previously held nigh-

absolute power. The Chancellor was also made accountable to Parliament first and King second.

Then came the Counterculture Movement. It spread from the United States. Time Magazine published an in-depth look at Israel, "the Barracks State". Israeli youth were outraged. Soon, every city in Israel was filled with pot-smoking, peace-loving hippies, all raging against the militaristic establishment and its racist policies. But they did not support. They formed a new party: Change for Israel. It advocated radical equality, pacifism, and loose sexual mores. They were a threat to the regime. Agents were sent in to agitate. Things came to a head in 1969. Troops came in to shut down the "Festival of '69" in Tel Aviv, where students were openly having sexual relations in public. The festival-goers tried to resist. A festival became a massacre. Fleeing students were gunned down. Martial law was declared, and for several tense months, it seemed a military coup was near. Though Israel was roundly condemned, the United States blocked any attempts by the United Nations to take action. The message was clear - "Turn on, tune in, drop out, drop dead." Counterculture would not be tolerated. Change for Israel was banned and never returned.

This time, change would not come from within, but from changing geopolitical realities. By the 1980s, more Americans were developing a political consciousness. What they found shocked them to the core. The United States was supporting literal Communist Nazis. This was something no red-blooded American could tolerate. Something had to be done. Israel found itself without its Great Power protector. In response, its leaders looked east. Treaties were signed with the Republic of China. These measures were controversial. Some felt they should not abandon the West so quickly, and that switching protectors would require cutbacks in increasingly expensive welfare programs. By this time, Israel had leveraged the talents of former Nazi scientists and immigrants to close its tech gap, and had thoroughly industrialized. It was now one of the twenty largest economies in the world. But welfare commitments had grown even faster than that, now forming almost half of the national budget.

Dissenters from the Labor Party and Wehrmacht Party split off to form their own party, the Israeli Third Position. Though they won early support through controversial and arguably tasteless rallies that openly aped the Third Reich, they soon built a loyal base in the disgruntled middle class, certain student bodies, and newly assimilated Arab Jews, who were eager to prove their patriotism against a nefarious "Other". The party soon swelled to a third of the electorate. The Labor Party and Wehrmacht Party formed a coalition to oppose it - The Left Coalition, or more simply, The Left.

By the 1990s, many idealistic youngsters had had enough. Though voting rights had been granted to all Jews in 1982, many felt this was not enough. Spurred on by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the seeming failure of socialism and communism, and an international sense of the death of tyranny, they protested en masse. Soon, they took their protests to the voting booths. A new party, the Greens, surged in popularity, winning a full eighth of the vote. The regime suspected treachery. The Greens were suppressed twice, once in 1993, and once in 2001. The first time, the party was outright banned. Its publications were destroyed, and its leaders were arrested or forced out of politics. But people continued to run under Green ideology, and people continued to vote for them. The regime was soon forced to relent. The second suppression came in 2001, when Mossad agents raided the Greens HQ, looking for evidence that they were funded by the Islamic State of India, otherwise known as the Caliphate, as part of an effort to destabilize Israel and ensure its dominance over the Middle East. Though they found a few vague records and some circumstantial evidence, some of it even dating back to the party founding, nothing was concrete, and the trial went nowhere. The Greens were only empowered by such tactics. Voting Green became a symbol of resistance and opposition to The Man. The regime backed off. In 2003, suffrage was extended to all races and religions in Israel. With that settled, the Greens split into the Greens and Blues, with the Blues believing that further revolution was necessary.

Backlash against this came in 2005. The long suffering Orthodox Jews had been treated even worse than Arabs. Their way of life was openly disparaged and demeaned. They were not able to exercise their freedoms. Now they were free, only to be insulted as part of the "White" majority, discredited for privileges they had never enjoyed. They struck back, forming a radical right party, the Orthodox Israelites. They promised to scourge all degenerate and immoral behavior from Israel, returning it to the ideal state promised by God. Support for the party remained limited.

Thus was formed the modern Israeli political landscape, with the ruling Left coalition versus the Israeli Third Position versus the New Left Green-Blue coalition versus the Orthodox Israelites, with factions and alliances shifting with changing conditions and on certain bills or issues.

Sea salt hung thick in the air, mixed in with diesel fumes, wafting upwards towards clouds of industrial smog. Behind him, the dim silver eye of the moon cast its gaze over the thickets of trees speckled, like molds and mildew, over the gentle hills of the fjord. Beneath his feet, steel lurched and rolled, and he struggled to keep his footing-and his stomach. He sniffed again. The distinctive iron-copper stench of blood. The first wave was ashore.

He was next. An inexorable fact. Implacable. It was a kind of hammer punch to the gut, and he held himself steady against the boat's side. How long? Five minutes? Two? One? Behind him, the officer. Hair oily slick. Gap in his teeth. Words like quicksilver. He dared not turn back to look. What was his price? What drove him to lead these damnable pillars of salt?

He mouthed a silent answer to himself, but he wasn't sure if he could believe it.

It was only then that he noticed the clenching of his own jaw, the grinding of tooth against tooth. He took a deep breath. He inhaled. He exhaled. He inhaled.

Then he was deaf. He looked up at the sky, touched his hand to his face. Everything was shaking. He brought his hand back. Water on it, water with just the barest swirls of pink and red floating through it. Poseidon had them, taking them all on his ride, shaking the earth utterly bare. The world shook again. He hit the ground, bashing his face against cold steel. He scrambled to his feet, blinded by salt, deafened by thunder, surrounded by all the storming of the world, trying to find solid ground, but he was plummeting, plummeting; away, away, down into the abyss he went, swallowed up by the endless night, darkness all around, darkness enveloping, dark and warm like the womb of his mother, the muffled sounds of metal falling into the void behind him, good God, they were all forsaken and damned, and he wanted to breathe, but he couldn't breathe-the world was swimming-no, he was swimming, bubbles of air floating in the endless murky darkness like stars, perfectly inky, the canvas of God, but damn it all, damn it all, he wanted to live, he wanted to struggle, he wanted the light; he saw the light all around him now, piercing the darkness, leading him away, puncturing the shells of men around him, little red novas bursting from their skin, like stars they were, all like stars, beams of light, and he wanted to scream now, not just breathe, for the fools all around were simply falling away from the light, falling further into the galactic void, the vast infinities of unity, but he refused; he touched a sunbeam, it burned him, it stung, the beautiful pain, the bright redness coming out of his arm, floating up towards the source of the light; he would follow the beams of light, his arms reaching and grasping and thrashing as furiously as they could, hoping to breathe, he couldn't breathe, but the sun was within reach, and he grabbed it.

And lo, brave Icarus struck out towards the sun, breaking into the sky. His head burst out from the underworld, and he was free at last. His hands brushed past carcasses, blank-faced and bloody-mouthed, eyes glittering like diamonds in the pale moonlight. And he was not Icarus, but Klaus Schirmer, having reclaimed name and soul from the depths.

The world was shattered again by the quaking of gods. His vision was whited out by sea foam and dirt. He could only hear the ringing. It was a harmony, of a sort, a music unearthly. And he lifted his voice, though he heard it not, joining his voice to that heavenly song. All around him, the wounded joined together, and he witnessed the glorious chant of chorale-one melody together.

He ducked behind a hedgehog, fire kicking up dust and sand all around him. He looked at his hands. All he could hear was rushing blood and beating hearts, and the music, the unending music of dying men. A lumbering steel beast emerged from a boat. It turned its steely gaze upon the enemy pillboxes-looked for only a moment-then was undone, having gazed at incomparable light. Light calls to light. Spark becomes conflagration. Before him, his own sun, glowing bright in the darkness.

And yet, he had to turn away. He slipped into the shadows, embracing them. Behind him, men of light, men burning with light, fire wrapping them like a blanket, faces melting like candle wax, limbs deforming and sloughing away, their voices joining with the choir. He dashed forward, into the night, the bonfire darkening the way behind him. His feet sinking into the marshy sand, water and blood mixing in its slush, his feet tearing free again. The burning behind him, the burning all around him, the burning in his body, fueling him.

He was drowning.

His hands were shaking. The world was shaking. He looked up and saw the moon shaking with rage. The sharp, shaky crackle of lightning broke the music. Sparks dancing around his black-clothed arm, rage sitting in those dark eyes beneath the peak of the peaked cap, screaming, screaming dissonant against the music. And he lifted his hand, in defiance of song, and thunder shot forth, lightning following, striking out through the darkness, a finger of wrath extended. A pillbox burst open, shattering, splinter cracking into a cloud of gray dust. Light in return, bullets that pierced the darkness just as easily as lightning, filled him with holes. Lightning backbiting

like hungry steel, swallowing up his body, burning the eyes into blackened, empty sockets, searing the flesh charcoal black, leaving white bone behind. But the he was not I. Klaus ventured onwards, the desiccated corpse of a SS officer lying beside, mummy-like, mouth contorted in one final song, Thulian magic having failed to overcome the power of music. And Klaus was scrabbling onwards, dashing forwards.

He ducked into an alcove of distended steel and broken concrete, hiding like the hedgehog buried beneath. And like the hedgehog supporting the debris, he supported the structure. He willed it to stand and continue standing. He prayed, earnestly, that it do so. He curled up. It was warm here.

Salty tears mixed in with the salt of the sea. He smacked his cracked lips together.

He heard the husky, barking, Eastern voice of a man approach. He peered outwards and saw a man, sun woven bright in his uniform, marching relentlessly forward. And though the man's mouth was not contorted in wholesome agony, he knew that his soul was pure and full of music.

"Be as fast as greyhounds! As tough as Krupp steel!"

And the man was struck by fire, but merely laughed at it, pulled forward by his own personal sun. She did not permit the wound; a wound was a scratch, nothing more. And Klaus felt the music stir deep in his heart, animating him just as surely as it would animate a clockwork man sealed in a clockwork coffin, lifting him up with climatic, spectacular timbre, like an electric jolt buzzing madly in his head, a thousand wasps trapped in his stomach giving him lift.

Klaus stood, and was healed, and he walked, and he was whole.

And took those few steps, though they stretched out into eternity, off the sand. And he met the earth, and he kissed it. He exhaled. With the breath came words, silent ones. I want to live.

Steel spikes rose from the earth all around him, crocuses planted in the frosted earth.

He lifted his eyes in supplication. He was in Anyagrad. And Anyagrad surrounded him, her breath hot and sultry on his neck.

He locked eyes with her. A girl, roughly his age, eyes like emerald lagoons, eyes to get lost in. Get lost, he did. He swam in them, neck-deep in their mysterious depths, shimmeringly scintillant. Their hearts were racing. Weapons were raised. His skin was clammy, covered with blood, sweat, and tears. He wanted nothing more than to bare his chest. Her hair was burning bright, the color of fire, the very essence of fire. Their chests moved in unison, life's breath escaping and entering as one. Eyes locked, souls gazing into souls.

"Sing me a love song."

A headless body, falling fast.

Author Notes: Have you ever noticed some words stop making sense when you say them enough? It's weird, isn't it? Like toilet.

Toilet.

Toilet.

The toilet stepped through the doorway, its shadow lengthening in the dusk sun. It grinned, unzipping its dick. She was crying.

That only made its plunger harder. Her face was flushed. Its reservoir was ready to flush. She crawled towards it, it kicked her.

"Know your place," said the toilet.

"Please, don't do this!" said the women. The toilet grew more erect.

"Wolof slaves were often used as house servants, while Gullah slaves from the Rice Coast made valuable contributions to South Carolinian agriculture," said the toilet.

"What?" asked the woman.

"Prepare your anus," said the toilet.

Normally, poop goes from the butt to the toilet. This is not what happened that day.

The woman laid there for an eternity, smeared with feces and shame.

Toilettoilettoilettoilettoilet.

Toilet. Toilet. Toilet.

Toilet.

Wow, that sure is a weird word. Anyways, sorry for the wait, life got crazy. I got kidnapped by the bus people and had to fight my way back to America. I lived, loved, learned, and even discovered the meaning of life (it's dairy products).

Wolof always reminds me of Woffy. If you guys are ever interested in loving romance instead of the ? I write, try him. Toilets aside, I unironically like him.

Reversi

Elsa opened her eyes. 9:29, blinking red on the nearby clock. She yawned, stretched. Tried to hit the clock's sleep button, failed. Knocked it to the ground. She tried to grab it, only to succeed in falling out of bed. She groaned. Her mouth tasted like wadded-up cotton and burnt copper.

She threw on a T-shirt which didn't matter. They were all the same anyways. Jeans, fraying and full of holes-very stylish. She brushed her teeth but didn't floss. She ran her fingers through her hair. It was messy. She took a look at herself. A 5, maybe a 6 on a good day. That was fine.

Everything was fine.

Mother was waiting in the dining room, brown bag in hand. It had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in it, same as always. Elsa felt a sharp, quick pain in her heart. She would get that checked out one day, once she had health insurance. Some day soon, perhaps.

Mother straightened up her tie, brushed her hair into place, adjusted her posture, patted her on the shoulder.

"I know you're going to make me proud today-my little sales manager! You're destined for great things, I know it," said Mother.

Elsa chuckled.

Out the door she went. There was no need to tell Mother about the hot dog suit or silly sign.

To the bus stop. Gray, once a futile attempt at post-modern design. The steel girders were meant to suggest the impression of a bus stop; they were devoid of roofing or covering. Rain had gotten in the way, rusting them and slumping them inwards. The benches were a common trap for newcomers. They were only meant to look like

benches, they weren't actually benches. Elsa sized up her surroundings. Peeling white paint, burning trash cans, the screechy howls of wild cats. Home, in short.

The bus arrived, crawling to a stop like a slug.

Elsa boarded. Her favorite seat was still open. Cracked leather, bits of stuffing breaking through the surface, even a spring sticking out of the side-no one else ever took it.

The bus route went straight through Holly Hope District, a jungle of glittering glass and million dollar McMansions. She always imagined hateful eyes leering at the bus, even though, on the outside, it was the same as all the others. She looked up at the tallest tower, one crowned by a cell phone tower. Mother said she should strive for greater things, but she wouldn't be happy there. It was just a gut feeling.

After all, like the tower itself, the woman at the top would be steel and glass. Bound, by duty, to serve her constituents. Yet it would be so difficult, wouldn't it? The temptation always would exist. The temptation to favor one's friends and family, to go down a suboptimal route to spare one's loved ones. But that would be a betrayal, immoral to the core. And, subtly, she noticed the closeness between immoral and immortal. Funny thing, that. Perhaps it was a business best governed by men of steel and glass, of machines with naught but cold logic. Silicon CMOS dancing stick diagram ballrooms, scream the exceptional men.

A game of kings is a game for machines. Yet how could any machine ever grasp the complexities?

Then again, how could any man?

Then down over the hills, the speed of the bus checked by the steady hand of the driver, down, down, down into Mistyvale. Mistyvale, most famous for its crackwhores and fake Rolexes-the

best in the world!-and black leather couches. The bus screeched still. Her stop.

Elsa got off, a figure following her.

She screamed before the pain even reached her, the knife plunging deep into her gut again and again.

The last thing she saw was herself, knife in hand, eyes filled with contempt.

She awoke on bare stone. A trail of blood was leading to her. She grabbed her gut, feeling it. She looked down at it. Her wounds had been closed with a series of clumsy stitches, the thread jumping every which way, diagonals and horizontals mixing like a poor man's cubist painting. At least she still had her liver. She looked around. Boxes were strewn all over, torn open, shredded cardboard and tape by the side of most. Half of a package, bloodstained-unreadable-was next to a pile of garbage bags. And in the corner, several black garbage bags, leaking red. Broken jars, shards of glass floating in yellow liquid. Cracked and dented brick walls. One wall was stained with blood and riddled with bullet holes. Spent casings by the doorway. Several first aid kits were toppled over. Her body was surrounded by string, rolls of bandages, and empty cans of spray disinfectant. Several paper instruction booklets were placed by her head, already spread open.

Her mouth was dry, her heart was pounding, her breath was heavy, and most of all, she wanted to go home.

She stood. A red-haired woman limped in through the door, grinning wide. A long thin scar stretched across one of her eyes, which was glassy white, and she was missing an arm. In her other, well-muscled arm, she held a pistol. Her white tank top and dark olive green dress slacks were stained with blood. Her green helmet was dented and had four golden stars. A dented, bloody crowbar was strapped to her back.

"See, you just had to trust me!" she chirped.

Then, without warning, she ran up and planted a wet, sloppy kiss on Elsa's lips.

"Just a little bit longer, okay? I'll get us through this."

"What the hell is going on?" asked Elsa.

"Isn't that the question we're all asking ourselves?" asked the redhead.

Before Elsa could reply, she responded to herself.

"It is! Because it's a really smart question, isn't it? I mean, usually we just listen to what our leaders tell us to do. But what gives them them right to be Bossy Bees always buzzing their orders? That almost makes me a Sour Samantha! Do rulers rule by the consent of the governed? That seems silly - I mean, I never agreed to anything! It seems that would give someone the right to opt out, but nobody lets anyone do that. For that matter, how do we even choose who rules us? Maybe everyone should have a fair share. But there are smart people - like you! - who clearly know more about government than others. Isn't it obvious they should have more power? Cratesman says that any system that makes the town idiot the equal of a beautiful, kind, intelligent magical sister is like, totally, dumb. That makes sense. But it also makes sense for everyone to get a fair shake. It's all like the story about Judas Priest, the one Punzie told me. You put all the gold in the lionskin bag to keep it from the wolfskin bag. Or was it something else? There were four animals, I think. I like animals."

The redhead paused to think.

"And I think that was a bit too smart for me, huh? Or... for Anna. So I'll try something else," said Anna.

She leaned into Elsa and touched Elsa's lips.

"I promise I'll take you to see fireworks someday," said Anna. Then she turned. "Now go! Through that door, quickly! I'll hold them off!"

Anna spat on the ground and set her feet firmly on the ground, narrowing her eyes. She grinned a toothy grin.

Elsa found a third religion.

Author Notes: by the way i had way too much fun with the puns last chapter lol

im so wacky